# Operation Christmas For El by Booklover1217

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**Summary:**

When the party discovers that El has never experienced a Christmas before they are horrified. That is until Mike comes up with the plan to give El the most amazing first Christmas imaginable and so Operation Christmas for El is born. The next days that follow are filled with gingerbread, mistletoe, snow, and the magic of Christmas which just may change El's life forever.

# 1. Operation Christmas for El

**Author's Note:**

> Hey everyone!!! OMG I am so damn excited for you guys to read this one!! I am completely obsessed with Christmas, it's my favourite time of the year, and when I got the idea for this one I just couldn't stop writing. I got it done in three weeks! I really hope you love it just as much as I do!

The very next day after the Snow Ball, the best night of El's life as she had proclaimed when she'd climbed into Hopper's truck at the end of the night, the smile on her face so big Hopper joked it was going to crack it, Hopper sat El down and reluctantly explained to what Dr. Owens told him.

'The Doc said that it would be best to lie low for a little while longer.'

El frowned, pursing her lips in confusion as she looked at him across the table, her Eggos untouched in front of her as a uneasy feeling filled her, putting her fork down on her plate with a loud crack.

'Lie low?' she repeated, frowning.

Hopper flinched, running a hand over his thin hair, before he sighed, looking down at her with a strained smile.

'It...uh...it means where you have to keep a low profile...stay out of sight...not draw attention to yourself. So he told me the safest thing to do is to stay in the cabin for another year. And then it'll be safe for you to leave for good.'

El's throat tightened as she realised what he was saying, what the word "lie low" truly meant. She would have to keep hiding. She wouldn't be able to go outside, to be with her friends, to go to school like she had dreamed for so long, to be a normal girl, for another year. 365 more days.

El pushed away from the table, hot tears prickling her eyes as she

turned away, ready to stomp to her room, her arms clutching at her elbows, trying to hold the anger and pain, the frustration of it all, in, to keep it from bursting out of her, when she heard the scrape of Hopper's chair behind her and arms were suddenly wrapped around her, her head pressed gently to his chest.

'I know it sucks, kid,' he said, voice gruff and angry, angry for her, hating that he had to do this to her again. She had already missed out on so much already, so much time she would never get back, all the experiences she should have had, all because those monsters had wanted to use her. That he now had to do it to keep her safe...well, it broke his heart.

'It won't be forever. We actually have a time-frame now. 365 days and I swear after that you will never have to see this cabin again if you don't want to. We'll move into town and you'll be able to leave whenever you want and be with your friends all the time.'

El nodded, her lips trembling as she pressed her face to his chest, wiping away the few hot tears that had managed to spill down onto her cheeks.

'Half-way happy,' she muttered into his shirt and he nodded, pressing a hard kiss to her head.

'That's right. But I promised you it would be different time and I meant it so...I'm going to let your friends come and visit twice a week.'

She blinked at him with wide eyes, stunned, not entirely sure she had heard him correctly.

'Twice a week?

Hopper held up two fingers, the twitch of his lips that passed as his version of a smile slowly forming on his face, warming up his eyes.

'Twice a week. That's a promise, kid. It'll have to be different days and times to keep anyone from getting too suspicious but I won't keep you from your friends anymore.'

El's face broke out into a wide smile and she threw herself back into

his arms.

'Thank you, thank you, thank you,' she whispered over and over.

Hopper laughed, patting her on the back.

'You're welcome, kid. I've already talked to them and organised for them all to come over on Monday since they are on winter break so I hope you're ready for visitors tomorrow.'

That had been yesterday, and El now found herself surrounded by her friends, the ones she had missed more than anything in the world for the long year, the 353 days, they'd all been apart.

She was sitting on the couch, leaning against Mike's chest as they cheered on Lucas and the new girl in the party, Max, as they battled it out on Will's Atari that he had brought over, along with a bunch of board games El had never played before, but was eagerly awaiting, ready to try and experience everything she had missed for so long.

There was a lot of breathless swearing from Lucas as Max beat him again and muttering from Hopper, where he sat at the kitchen table, groaning about how his cabin had suddenly became a half-way home for teenagers and how he was 'going to regret this', though El didn't miss the soft smile he sent her as he saw how happy she was, clapping when Max knocked Lucas back, her laughter ringing through the room.

El glanced down at Max, her smile fading slightly, the lingering guilt from before that still tugged at her insides sometimes returning. But it was better than the feeling she used to get before when she looked at her, that had made her stomach tighten, and her face grow hot, the irrational need for Max to go away taking her over, blinding her to any other feeling.

A feeling that Mike had quickly explained was called jealousy when she had told him about how she'd seen Max and him in the gymnasium and how the way he had smiled at her had made her feel, needing a word to explain it, having never experienced it before.

But that had all changed when Max had asked to speak to her at the

Snow Ball two days ago. In private. El had reluctantly left Mike's side, feeling the boys eyes digging into their backs as they walked a few paces away to stand by the wall. They had both shifted awkwardly, not meeting each other's eyes as El waited impatiently for Max to speak, wanting to get back to Mike, the minutes ticking by so quickly to 9-1-5 when Hopper would return for her and they would be separated again.

Max had chewed her lip anxiously, before she just let out the words that had been gnawing at her for the month since she had meet El, knowing if she didn't ask her now she would lose her nerve completely.

'Did I do something to you to make you not like me?'

El sighed, tugging on the blue bracelet that Hopper had given her that night as a surprise gift, ('just because', he'd told her when she'd asked why, tears that she didn't understand pooling in his eyes as she'd reverently slipped it around her wrist), shrugging her shoulders dejectedly.

'No,' she said, lifting her head from where she'd been staring at the floor, guilt twisting her insides as she saw the hurt in Max's eyes, the guilt that had sat there since Mike had told her that he didn't like Max like that, that she was just a friend. She'd obviously hurt her, for no good reason other than her only stupid jealousy.

'I...I saw you and Mike in the gym that day...you were on that thing you ride...'

'Skateboard,' Mike supplied, her face growing slightly amused as El jerked her shoulder, not really caring what it was called in that moment.

'He...he was smiling at you and I thought...that maybe...' El trailed off, looking away, not meeting Max's eyes as her cheeks began to heat up, not wanting to say the words that she now knew were ridiculous aloud.

That Max was replacing her, that she was losing her friends to someone new. That they'd all forgotten her. And, worst of all, that

Mike didn't like her anymore.

Max frowned at El for a second before her eyes widened in sudden realisation and she burst out into surprised laughter, causing El to jump, turning wide eyes to stare at her.

'Oh my god...you seriously thought...Mike and me...oh ew...that's so gross,' she said, gagging slightly at the thought, sticking her finger in her mouth.

'Mike's not gross,' El said, face offended as she looked at Mike over her shoulder, disgruntled expression softening as she saw him watching them worriedly, an dreamy smile curving up the corner of her lips as their eyes met and he grinned crookedly at her.

Max rolled her eyes at how disgustingly cute they were, shaking her head.

'Yeah, well of course he isn't to you, but I don't...like him like that...like at all. I like...'

Max snapped her mouth shut as she realised what she had been about to say, to admit aloud for the first time, her eyes darting over anxiously to look at Lucas who was laughing at something Will had said, her face softening.

El glanced at where Max was looking, her eyes darting between the two of them before her mouth fell open, forming into a wide 'o' as she realised what she'd missed before.

Max didn't like Mike...she liked Lucas. As more than a friend. It was so obvious now. How had she missed it?

El felt a wave of relief fall over her and she gave Max a genuine smile, holding out her hand like she'd once seen Mike and Lucas do when they were making up from a fight.

'I'm sorry for being mean to you. Friends?'

Max's face lit up, a wide grin spreading across her face as she nodded eagerly, holding her hand out as well, like that first night when they'd meet.

Despite what she had told herself over and over after El had dismissed her that first night, walking away as if she hadn't even spoken, rejecting her just like Mike, that she didn't want to be friends with her anyway, she'd known even then that'd it been a lie.
She had wanted it, almost desperately, wanted to be friends with the girl the boys looked at and talked about with awe, like she was a real life superhero.

Lucas had tried to reassure her that El would warm up to her, like Mike eventually had, that it just took a while for her to trust anyone, but she'd still been hurt, feeling like she was lacking something, wanting nothing more than to be accepted.

She'd always wanted a friend that was a girl, something she had never had, but always longed for, someone to share things with that she could never tell the boys, to be herself with completely. And now it was actually happening, she thought, as she took El's hand, pumping it twice, both of them grinning at each other.

They turned to walk back to the boys, who quickly pretended not to have been spying on them, quickly looking down at the drinks table, seeming to find something in the punch just fascinating.

Max shot El a look, rolling her eyes, muttering the words 'boys' with an exasperated fondness, making El giggle. And that was that. From that moment on they were friends.

And it was nice, El thought, glancing around the room at the way they were all crammed into the tiny living room together, her, Mike and Dustin squished together on the couch like sardines, while Will, Lucas and Max were sprawled across the floor, all of them cheering and yelling out instructions over one another as Max and Lucas continued to battle it out, Lucas's tongue sticking out in concentration.

'Shit!' he groaned, throwing down the controller as Max beat him again.

She let out a loud whoop, jumping to her feet and doing a dance that had everyone bursting out laughing, sticking her tongue out at Lucas, thumb on her nose and wiggling her fingers at him.

'Suck it, Sinclair. Three in a row!'

Mike turned to El, who had laid her head against his chest about an hour ago and hadn't moved. He nuzzled her head with his, causing her to look up at him, the secret half-smile that he adored tilting the corner of her lips. He resisted the urge to kiss her, glancing nervously at Hopper out of the corner of his eye to see if he was watching them, letting out a breath in relief when he found him studying the case files in front of him intently, eyes narrowed in concentration.

He quickly pressed his lips to the top of her head, grinning as her smile widened, and rubbed her arm with his thumb.

'Do you want to have a go?' he asked, lifting his chin towards the game, as the others argued jokingly about who was going to play next, Max proudly proclaiming no-one could beat her, with Will slyly asking why it was Dustin still had the high-score on Donkey Kong, causing Dustin to beat his chest dramatically, making them all groan, throwing pillows at him.

El shook her head, leaning her against Mike's chest sleepily, her eyes on his. The happiness in them made warmth fill her chest, and she didn't want to move, didn't want to leave this moment just yet, content to just sit there with him, something they hadn't gotten to do for so long. To just be together.

'No. I like to watch,'she said, simply, 'I don't want to move yet.'

Mike nodded, the arm around her waist tightening, knowing exactly how she was feeling.

He never wanted to leave her either, wanted to spend every minute he could with her, the need to touch her, even just to hold her hand or sit beside her, making the constant ache that had sat inside his chest for 353 days less painful, more bearable. Making it fade a little bit more with every bit of proof that he got that she was here, she was real. She had come back to him.

He would be happy to just sit like this for the rest of the day, not speaking, just soaking in each other's presence, but he knew he couldn't be selfish. The others had missed her just as much.

'Well if you change your mind...definitely play Lucas. He sucks.'

'Hey!' Lucas said, turning to glare at Mike, having caught his words at the last moment, and Mike pulled an 'oops' face, shooting him an apologetic look.

Lucas huffed out a laugh, rolling his eyes.

'Sure, whatever, lover-boy', he said, shoving his legs over, so he could sit against the couch.
Mike blushed at the comment, glaring at Lucas, while El just giggled, curling in closer to Mike, leaning her chin against his shoulder.

'Lover-boy...' she mouthed teasingly, and he gaped at her, before giving her a mock-glare.

'Traitor,' he mouthed back, poking her in the side. She giggled again, her body jerking up from the couch as the touch tickled. His eyes widened and a smirk curled on his lips as he wiggled his fingers at her, slowly lowering them to her side as she laughed, shaking her head, giving him a warning look.

'No...it tickles...no...' she said, having learnt the word from Hopper when he'd accidentally learnt she was ticklish, and Mike had taken delight in the fact, tickling her at any given moment, loving the startled laughter that always escaped her, the sound the most beautiful thing he'd ever heard.

'Oh my god, guys, it's snowing!' Will said suddenly, his voice high with excitement as he jumped up from the floor, running to the window where he bounced up and down, grinning at the heavy white lumps falling from the sky.

'Oh finally! I thought it wasn't going to happen this year,' Dustin said, scrambling up off the couch, almost knocking Mike into El, who sent him an exasperated look, but quickly climbed off after him, joining their friends at the window.

'Wow,' Max breathed, her voice filled with awe as she watched it fall, her nose almost pressed to the window, fogging it with her breath, 'I've never seen snow before. It's really...it's prettier than I expected.'

'Really?' Lucas asked, surprised.

Max shrugged, pushing back her hair, letting out a groan as she was squished into the window, looking at Lucas over their friends heads.

'Well yeah. It doesn't snow in California.'

'Come on, guys, let's go have a look,' Mike said eagerly, and they all ran to the door where they'd put their gloves, scarfs and jackets when they'd first arrived, quickly pulling them out, laughing breathlessly as they got tangled.

Will was the first out the door, letting out a quiet whoop as he jumped off the three steps, quickly followed by Max who spun in a circle, her arms out, laughing. Dustin, Lucas and Mike came down as one, getting stuck on the stairs, shoving and squeezing until they came through, and eagerly began to scoop up the tiny piles of snow, squishing them together to make small snow balls.

Mike turned up around excitedly to show El the snow ball. He frowned when he didn't find her with their friends, glancing around anxiously. He found her standing in the doorway of the house watching, still wearing the thicks tights and long-sleeved shirt she had been in before, her jacket hanging on the rack behind her, untouched.

Her hands were clenched in fists beside her, her face almost ghostly white as she stared out at the icy landscape, her throat bobbing as she swallowed, eyes wide and staring. Hopper was standing beside her, his hand resting on her shoulder, as if offering silent support, his eyes sad as he looked down at her.

Mike's stomach clenched, something that felt a lot like dread sliding into his stomach, settling there coldly.

'Hey, El, you okay?' he asked, walking up the steps slowly towards her, frowning slightly, reaching out to brush back one of her curls, worry filling him at the real fear he could see in her eyes as the icy breeze shot across the porch, shoulders stiffening as it hit her.

Hopper caught Mike's eye, nodding at him as he patted El's shoulder

and stepped out onto the porch, reaching into his pocket to pull out the packet of cigarettes he kept there, quickly lighting one and taking a deep drawl. He watched as El stepped slightly out of the house until her arm brushed against Mike's, relaxing slightly at his touch, and felt the helplessness and anger that had tightened his chest when he'd saw El's face drain of all colour at the word snow and made him run to her as her breath suddenly came faster, forcing him to coach her to breath normally again, unnoticed, thankfully, by her friends, loosen.

But he'd known he had to get her to the door, to get her to Mike, because somehow the Wheeler kid always understood, always knew how to calm her down or how to explain things to her in a way that she understood, always patient and never pushing her.

The kid was good for her, good to her, Hopper begrudgingly admitted silently to himself, even though the idea of his adopted teenager daughter dating already made his head hurt.

Mike was what she needed right now. He'd be able to help her.

El shook her head, inching in closer until the warmth of Mike's body seeped into hers, even through the many layers he was wearing, her hand reaching frantically for his. When she didn't find it, she just latched onto his sleeve, squeezing it so tightly her knuckles cracked.

'I...I don't like snow.'

The others heard her whispered words, even through their laughter and play, and turned as one to gape at her, stunned, for once, into silence.

'What?' Dustin said, blinking at her almost owlishly, eyes wide.

'How can you not like snow?' Lucas asked, eyebrows drawing together in complete disbelief and confusion as he stared at her, head cocked to the side.

'I know it looks a bit gross but it really is pretty cool, El. Come on, come have a look.' Max said, holding up a gloved hand to show off the snowflake she had caught, bouncing excitedly as the snow caught in her wild, red hair.

But El shook her head again, eyes wide with panic, as she took a slow step back into the cabin, giving them a tight smile that didn't quite reach her eyes.

'No, that's okay. I'll stay here...it's too...wet and cold.'

Mike was watching her, not understanding, confusion filling him. Why wouldn't she like snow? Did Hopper not let her play it in last winter? Maybe this was the first time she'd ever seen it properly. It could be a bit scary, he thought, if you'd never been around it before.

Will walked up the stairs towards them, every movement cautious as he walked slowly, trying not to startle her. El and Will had gotten closer since they'd first meet properly after the Mind Flayer incident, bonding over their shared experiences in the Upside Down and the monsters that called it home, and knew each other's triggers and nightmares better than anyone else, except maybe Mike who just somehow sensed when El was hurt or afraid, knowing instantly when to comfort or reassure her.

Will walked over to her and took her spare hand in his, squeezing it gently, drawing her wide, nervous eyes to his, giving her an encouraging smile.

'Snow can be really fun, El. You can go sledding and have snowball fights and make snowman. And it means that winter break is coming up so we have two weeks off school for Christmas.'

'Chris-mas?' El said slowly, momentarily distracted from her fear as she looked from Will to Mike, her delicate eyebrows drawing together in confusion.

They all gaped at her for a moment before turning as one to glare at Hopper who was leaning against the porch of the house, his cigarette hanging from his lips. He blinked at the force of their looks, raising his eyebrows silently, not sure what he had just missed, too lost in his own thoughts.

'You didn't give her a Christmas last year?' Mike said, his voice hard, eyes narrowing on him, fingers clenching into fists.

What the hell was wrong with him? he thought angrily, the slight bitterness he still held towards the man who had kept El from him and his friends, who had kept her hidden and lied about her existence for almost a year, flaring up again. How could he not give El a Christmas? Hadn't she missed out on enough already?

'Jesus, Chief, that's just plain mean', Dustin said, shaking his head at him in disbelief, sighing dramatically, 'to deny our El the joy of Christmas. Cruel.'

El glanced between them, a line appearing between her eyebrows as she watched, though Mike noticed that she didn't move from the doorframe, her arm wrapped tightly around her waist, fingers twitching slightly as she glanced nervously at the snow that was beginning to fall more heavily. Worry filled him and he slowly inched closer, reaching over to loosen her hold on her waist and quietly slipping his fingers between hers.

El jumped, looking up at him, eyes startled, before her face softened and she gave him a tiny smile. She moved in closer, her fingers squeezing his tightly, resting her head on his shoulder, leaning in as if she was seeking comfort. The gesture only made Mike's worry grow, caressing her knuckles soothingly with his thumb, trying to help in anyway he could, even not knowing what was going.

She was acting weird...but why? What was he missing?

'Hey, hey!' Hopper yelled over their many voices as they berated him, drawing Mike from his thoughts, turning back in time to see Hopper's face pull down into an offended scowl as he held his hands up defensively, 'Nice to know you all think I'm such a monster. But for your information, I didn't give El a Christmas last year because I didn't even find her till after.'

'Chris-mas?' El asked again, lifting her head off Mike's shoulder to look at them expectantly.

Lucas quickly began to explain Christmas to El, all about Santa and how he left presents under the tree, everyone piping up every few seconds to add some knowledge of their own but Mike barely heard a word of it, all the noises of his friends and El's questions fading away

behind the sudden deafening buzz in his ears. He could feel all the blood beginning to drain from his face as his hands began to shake.

El....El hadn't been with Hopper until after Christmas last year? But...he'd thought she'd been with him the entire time. If she hadn't been with him....he thought, swallowing back the sudden panicked lump that had formed in his throat, where was she?

'Wait...where were you?' Mike blurted out, speaking over Dustin who had been happily explaining how to make ginger-bread houses to a fascinated El, and the entire group suddenly went silent, as if his words made them all realise what they had missed. The questions that Hopper's words suddenly unearthed.

They'd never asked, all of them having assumed that El had always been with Hopper, that she had been safe and hiding in Hopper's cabin for the entire time she'd been gone. But that clearly wasn't true.

'Where were you?' Mike said again, his voice beginning to shake.

El's eyes, wide and dark with shock, clashed with his, her face draining of all colour.

No. No, no, no, she thought, her head shaking frantically as she took a startled step back, breath hissing out in panic.

No, she couldn't tell him. Couldn't tell him where she'd been before. It would hurt him too much. She'd been keeping it a secret since she'd returned, avoiding any questions her friends had asked about how she'd gotten out of the Upside Down, only telling them about her time with Hopper in the cabin, watching television, learning to read and morse code.

Friend's don't lie. That was the rule she lived her life by, one of the very first things Mike had taught her. But Hopper had told her that not saying something wasn't the same as telling a lie. That if you were keeping something a secret to protect someone from something that would hurt them it was okay.

She turned her half-panicked, half-chastising eyes on Hopper, slightly annoyed at him for revealing so much, for letting slip the very thing

she'd been trying to keep from them, silently begging him not to answer Mike's question.

Hopper sighed, his face grave as he shook his head at her.

'You have to tell them, kid. You can't keep it a secret forever.'

Mike exchanged a look with his friends who were watching with wide, confused eyes, standing still as stone, as if afraid of moving, of breathing, scared of what was about to be revealed.

Mike stared at El, his heart beginning to pound in his chest, fear he didn't quite understand filling him as El shook her head stubbornly, her whole body twitching as if trying to reject Hopper's words. She pressed her lips together so hard they turned white, as if she was physically holding the words back. But her eyes flickered towards the woods that surrounded their small cabin, her face falling for a second as the fear that had slipped across her face earlier returned and he suddenly knew. He had his answer.

The woods, Mike thought, a strangled noise escaping his throat, horrified understanding filling him as he stared out into the thick woods, the trees already bare, stripped from their leaves months before, empty and barren, snow slowly covering the hard ground. The icy cold wind bit into his exposed skin, even with all the layers he was wearing, standing there frozen.

She'd been living in the woods. All that time he'd been looking for her she'd been out there, lost and alone, cold and probably so scared that she'd never be safe again. Not knowing whether she'd ever be found or if it'd ever be safe to come back. To come home to her friends. To him.

The shocked disbelief that had left him frozen quickly faded, replaced by a sharp pain that slashed through him, leaving his insides trembling. He lifted his eyes back to hers as she watched him anxiously, her breath coming out in quick gasps that rose up in front of her face in a white mist.

The others stepped back quietly, giving them as much privacy as they could in the tiny space, eyes turned away. No-one dared to speak, the

sudden tension so tight that they knew if anyone dared speak or breath wrong it would shatter. And all hell would break loose.

'But...why didn't you come to me? To my house? I would have looked after you. I would have let you stay with me', he asked, voice trembling with hurt and confusion, eyebrows lowering.

El's chest tightened at the pain and hurt she could see in his face, her chin wobbling slightly.

'I...I did...' she said, the words so soft and hesitant Mike had to lean in closer to hear her.

He stilled when her words registered in his mind, his heart stopping. El wished she could take the words, to snatch them out of the air and draw them back into her as she watched Mike's somehow go even paler, shock darkening his eyes as he took a startled step back.

'W-what?'

El took a deep, trembling breath, glancing at Hopper for help, who just nodded encouragingly, understanding that this was the hardest conversation El had ever had to have. But she needed to do it, the guilt that she had been carrying around for weeks for not telling Mike and her friends the truth eating away at her.

She looked down at her feet, twisting her hands anxiously in front of her so she wouldn't have to meet his eyes.

'After...after the Demogorgon, I woke up in the Upside Down, but I found a way out. And I....I went back to your house because I knew you'd be there...that it'd be safe. But...they...'

El's voice trailed off as her breath hitched on a sob she barely managed to hold back, hot tears filling her eyes, unable to finish the sentence, the memory of coming over the hill to Mike's house and seeing those flashing lights and the men and women everywhere causing fresh pain to lance through her, making it hard to breathe.

They had taken everything from her again in that one moment. She had known that she couldn't go back, that she couldn't go to Mike, couldn't tell him she was alright. Because if she did, they would find

a way to hurt him to get to her, to get her back. So she'd run, run from the only person who had ever treated her like a human being, who had liked her for her, who had told her she mattered. Run from the only home she had ever known. From Mike.

Mike didn't need her to finish the sentence, already knowing the words she couldn't speak aloud, his entire body going cold.

Because they had gotten there first. The Bad Men. The ones who had questioned him all night, who had tried to make him believe the filthy, awful lies they were feeding him about El. Who had tried to make him betray her, to tell them where she was hiding.

'You were really there that night. I saw you in the window. I didn't imagine it.'

El nodded, her eyes filling with fresh tears.

'Yes. I couldn't stay, Mike. They...they would hurt you if....I was there. I couldn't let them do that. So I left.'

A wave of anguish rushed over Mike at her words, constricting his lungs until he couldn't breathe, hot tears burning at the back of his eyes, threatening to spill over.

'How long? How long were you out there?'

El turned her face away from him, squeezing her eyes shut to keep the tears from slipping down her cheeks, face determined, refusing to answer his question. She knew what the knowledge would do to him...and just...she couldn't do that to him. Couldn't hurt him that way.

Mike's throat tightened even more as he saw the anguish that tightened her face as she turned away from him, and turned to Hopper, stubborn determination firming his jaw.

'How long?' he repeated, louder this time, the others watching with wide eyes, holding their breath.

El's head jerked up, her eyes pleading as they stared at Hopper, begging him not to speak, knowing it would make Mike angry with

her if she didn't tell him, but that was okay. She'd rather him be mad at her than in pain.

Hopper sighed, running a hand over his grizzly face, before shooting El an exasperated and apologetic look.
He understood her reasons, had even supported them when she'd first asked him to keep her secret, but he couldn't do it anymore. The Wheeler kid deserved the truth, no matter how much El wanted to protect him from it.

'I found her on the 27th of December. She was out there for forty-five days.'

Forty-five days, Mike thought, his throat tightening painfully as the words echoed over and over in his head. Agony sliced through him as the full realisation of the horror she had been through hit him fully, stumbling back, feeling like he was going to throw up, bile rising in his throat.

It was his fault. All of it was his fault. Forty-five days she'd been out there. Forty-five days alone and afraid and starving because she'd been protecting him and their friends, like she was always had. All while he'd been safe and warm in his house, surrounding by family and friends that loved him, ignorant to the knowledge that if he'd just gone out into the woods, instead of just calling for her on his Supercom, he would have found her. He could have saved her if only he'd looked.

Helplessness and regret almost choked him as he realised she'd been here all that time...that she'd been so close...and he had never known. Never known she was freezing in the woods with no friends or warmth or any idea if she would ever be okay again.

Mike's face contorted with agony and grief, his shoulders folding inwards and beginning to shake as tears filled his face, sliding down his pale cheeks before he had a chance to duck his head, hiding his reaction from her, trying to spare her from it. She had already been through enough. She didn't need to feel guilty about this as well.

He spun around, sliding past El, barely managing to slip from the hands she frantically reached out to him with, quickly walking into

the cabin and into the only private room, El's room, closing the door behind him with a quiet click.
El stared after him, her face crumpling as the tears she'd been holding back burst out her with the sob that rocked her body, pressing a hand to her mouth to try to smother it.

A gentle hand touched her arm and El spun around, throwing herself into their arms, not caring who it was in that moment, just needing someone to hold her. The warm arms hesitated for a minute before they tightened around her. El buried her face in their chest, her breath hiccupping.

She'd hurt him. She knew it would, but seeing the devastation all over him, seeing the actual pain of it hit him...she let out another sob, breathing in deeply, her cheeks feeling hot and sticky. She breathed in the sweet smell of chocolate and hairspray, and relaxed even more as she realised Dustin was the one hugging her, while someone else was holding her hand, another patting her hair and another rubbing soothing circles on her back.

She lifted her head, rubbing her wet cheek against her shoulder and gave her friends a trembling smile as they looked at her anxiously, their eyes wide, all shooting worried looks over her shoulder at where Mike had disappeared.

'I'm sorry,' she said, cheeks heating up a little, embarrassed by her tears.

Max shook her head, waving away her apology with a fierce expression.

'It's okay, El.'

'Yeah, don't apologise to us. I just wish we had known...that we could have helped you,' Lucas said, the hand on her shoulder squeezing gently.

Dustin and Will nodded in agreement, their smiles sad but genuine.

'I'm sorry that you went through that. How did you even keep warm out there?' Will asked, frowning slightly, shivering slightly as the

breeze rushed through the porch again, at the thought of being out in it all day and night, of having no other choice.

'Yeah...and what did you eat?' Dustin asked, curiously.

El flushed as she remembered the squirrels she had had to kill for food the month she was out in the woods and shook her head, not quite ready to answer that one.

She turned her head, stepping out of the warmth of Dustin's hug, and glanced anxiously over at her closed door, worrying her lip between her teeth, wanting nothing more than to go inside and comfort him. But....would he want her there? Was he angry at her?

A large warm hand settled on the back of her neck making El jump, craning her head to look up at Hopper who gave her his characteristic straight-lipped smile. His eyes were soft and warm though, and he gave her a gentle nudge forward.

'Go on, kid. He needs you. We'll just wait out here till you're both ready'

El sniffled, wiping at her running nose, before she slowly walking towards the door, hesitating for only a second before she took a deep breath and stepped inside, closing it quietly behind her.

She slowly turned around and froze at what she found, her heart clenching painfully. breath catching on a fresh sob.

Mike was curled up on the floor in a ball beside her bed, his face buried in his hands, entire body shaking and shuddering with silent, violent sobs. Before El even knew she had moved she was knelling in front of him, placing a hand on his trembling shoulder, tears filling her eyes.

'Mike', she said, her voice trembling uncontrollably.

Mike froze at the sound of her soft voice, having not heard her come in, and slowly lifted his head, his swollen, blood-shot eyes meeting hers. They stared at each other for one breathless second before Mike's face crumpled again and he reached for her, yanking her into arms, almost into his lap, holding on tight as he buried his face in her

shoulders with a shaky breath.

El let out a surprised yelp, but her entire body sagged against him, her arms immediately wrapping around his waist to hold on just as tight. She pressed her wet cheek against his hair, closing her eyes as she felt his entire body shuddering against her own, unable to hold back the tears that continued to run down his cheeks. She closed her eyes with a sob of her own, breathing in the familiar, comforting smell of the washing powder his Mom used, his minty shampoo and a smell that was uniquely Mike, that reminded her of bike rides in the sun, of sitting in the fort together eating Eggos, and of his lips pressed sweetly against her own. Reminded her of home and happiness, the things he had been the first to give her.

Mike's tightened his arms around her, feeling the pain that had erupted through him the second he'd heard what she'd been through last year, the pain and suffering that had been added to the horrors she'd already experienced too much of in her short life, ease slightly at the feeling of having her in his arms. Of knowing she was safe, that was here, a fact that still stunned him sometimes, still finding it hard to believe even after the last few weeks.

El ran a hand over his soft black hair, feeling her shoulder grow damp, his tears hot and wet against her skin.

'It's okay, Mike', she said, trying to comfort him, though she couldn't stop her voice from shaking.

Mike shook his head almost violently, lifting his head to stare at her blurry outline, the hot tears coming so fast now they were blinding. His cheeks were wet and so pale his freckles were stark against them, the only colour in his face the red of his swollen eyes.

'No', he strangled out, chin wobbling, 'It's not okay. None of this is okay.'

Mike was suddenly furious, the urge to scream, to throw things, to destroy something, to somehow get his hands on the people who had done this to her choking him. Furious at the Bad Men for ruining everything, for giving her no choice but to run, when they could have been together from that first night after the Demogorgon. Furious

with the world for putting them through all of it, for allowing such horrible things to happen to her. For separating them in the first place. And furious with himself for not finding her. For not being to save her.

He sagged against the bed, burying his face in his hands again, unable to look at her, the guilt of it all leaving him feeling weak and useless, sorrow tightening his chest.

'It's not okay. I told you that I'd take you home...that you'd be safe...and I couldn't do that. I broke that promise. And because of that you were alone out there. It's all my fault, El. I could've found you....I could have helped...'

'No,' El said, blinking back the tears that stung her eyes, dashing them away impatiently as they began to slide down her cheeks, her curls sticking to her wet cheeks. Her heart felt like it would shatter at the guilt and pain shaking Mike's voice, the agony of it tightening her chest.

This was why she had never wanted to tell Mike this part of her story. Because she had known that he would blame himself, even though it, none of it, was not his fault. It was just the type of person he was, kind and selfless, hot-headed and sweet, and who cared about his friends and those he loved above everything else.

'No, Mike. It is not your fault. Don't....think that. I survived because of you. I needed to see you....and it....it gave me the...', her voice trailed off, annoyance flittering across her face, her inability to find the words she needed frustrating her, 'I...kept going because of you. It's....the Bad Men's fault. Not yours.'

'But...'

El shook her head, pressing her hand to his mouth, cutting off the protest she could see forming on his face.

'No but. I'm okay now. And if I hadn't lived out there, I wouldn't have Hopper. I'm here now. We're together and I'm not going anywhere.'

Mike swallowed hard, his eyes searching hers for a second before he

let out a deep, shuddering breath at the truth and love he saw in them, all the tension easing out of his body.

'Promise?' he asked, though he already knew the answer, reaching out to slide his fingers along hers, slipping his inbetween and squeezing.

'Promise,' she said without hesitation, her eyes on his, before she slowly leant forward, pressing her lips to his gently, tasting the salt from both their tears on his lips.

Mike kissed her back, the kiss sweet, lingering a bit longer than their other kisses, before he reluctantly pulled back, pressing his forehead against hers.

El smiled sweetly against his skin, brushing another kiss against his cheek before she lifted her hands and began to wipe away the wetness that still clung to his cheeks. He let out a quiet laugh, reaching up to do the same to her, fingers gentle, cool and soothing against her heated skin.

El gave him a sheepish smile, wiping her running nose on the sleeve of her shirt, but neither of them were embarrassed. They were never embarrassed by their feelings for one another, something that had simply become a part of who they were, like their eye colour, the curve of their smile or the sound of their laughter. They loved each other with everything they had, even if they hadn't yet said it aloud, not quite understanding what they were feeling. But what they both knew was that these feelings would never fade, would only grow stronger with every day, week, month and year they spent together. It was for forever.

They sat together silently for a few minutes, running their hands over each other, taking the chance to re-memorise each other's faces, the feel of their hair under their fingers, the shape of their smiles and how they fit perfectly together, El leaning her head against his shoulder, an opportunity they hadn't had since their rushed reunion almost a month ago. They had been surrrounded people every time they'd seen each other, this being the first time they'd been truly alone together, and they were taking advantage of it.

After nearly half an hour sitting quietly together, not even speaking, just happy to be with one another, they noticed the light slowly fading from the room, and realised how long they'd be gone and sighed, knowing they would have to go back. They reluctantly pushed up from the dusty floor to go and join the others, not letting go of each other's hands once.

They found Hopper and their friends in the living room of the cabin, Hopper sitting on the couch watching a football game, a beer in his hand, while the others were all lying, cramped together on the floor in front of him, a board game sat in the middle of them.

They all looked up as Mike and El emerged from the room, their worried faces smoothing out into relief as they saw the small smiles they both gave them, Mike's face flushing slightly in embarrassment at falling apart in front of them.

'Hey guys, we were just about to start a round of monopoly. Want to join?' Will said, shifting over on his stomach to make room for Mike and El to sit down beside him.

Mike and El exchanged a look, her hand tightening on his as they slowly sat down beside them, both of them grateful for their friends for not commenting on their red-rimmed eyes and swollen cheeks, for trying to distract them from the emotional turmoil of the last hour. They had definitely lucked out in the friend department.

'Yeah, we even left the top-hat game piece for you, El, and that's so the best one', Dustin said, holding it out proudly for El who took it with a curious frown, turning over the cool metal in her hands.

'Pfft...the racing car is so the best piece,' Lucas said, rolling his eyes at Max who just shook her head, watching, amused at her boyfriend and friend began to bicker, Dustin's face beyond insulted.

The tension from before quickly melted away as they began to play, laughter and good-natured fighting breaking out between them all as the game continued. El was surprised to find she was really good at the game they called Monopoly, rolling the highest numbers on the dice almost every time by pure accident, having to deny using her powers and even showing them her nose was not bleeding as Will

good-naturedly accused her of cheating, nudging her with his shoulder to show he was joking.

The day quickly sped by and soon it was time for them all to leave. They reluctantly pulled on their coats and gloves, slumping out into the woods, over the trip-wire and down the path to the car where Nancy was waiting for them, the car still running.

Mike fell behind the others, taking his time putting his coat on so he could give El a quick peck on the lips, shooting Hopper a nervous look over his shoulder where he was still sat on the couch, purposely ignoring them, knowing they both needed this moment after the emotional wringer they'd both been through that afternoon, before he ran out of the cabin with a quick wave and crooked smile over his shoulder.

El waved back at him, her smile almost hurting her cheeks as she closed the door behind it, leaning against it for a second, feeling breathless. She walked over to the couch after a few minutes and sat down beside Hopper, leaning her head against his shoulder with a happy sigh.

Hopper glanced down at her, surprised, still not used to the easy affection she had begun to show him in the last few weeks before he softened, wrapping an arm around her shoulders.

'All good, kid?' he asked, voice growing gruff and wet as he saw the happiness she was practically glowing with him, leaning down to kiss her head.

El nodded, nuzzling in closer, her eyes fluttering closed as she let out a quiet yawn.

'Good,' she mumbled sleepily before quietly drifting off, exhausted but content for the first time in a long time.

**

Mike sat in the front seat of the car, leaning his head against the cool glass as his friend's chattered excitedly behind him, telling Nancy all about their day with El, though they were careful not to mention the emotional turn the day had taken, and he would be eternally grateful

to them for that.

He was exhausted, his eyes slowly beginning to slide shut, and it was taking everything he had not to nod off then and there. Everything inside him felt drained but somehow lighter, like everything he had been holding and bottling up inside himself for the longest and most painful year of his life had finally been let loose, like a weight had been lifted from his chest and he could breathe again, fully and easily.

Though he couldn't help the knot that had settled deep inside his stomach, as it always did, when he had walked away from El, his throat tightening painfully as he resisted the urge to rush back and hold her tight, to refuse to leave her side again. But he knew he couldn't do that. He couldn't be selfish with her, no matter how much he wanted to be. It was safest for her to stay with Hopper, who even Mike could admit loved her like she was his own, even if she had to stay inside and hide away for another year. All the mattered was that she was safe, and at least this time they would be able to see each other. They could make it another a year. They could do anything together.

He didn't notice Nancy glancing at him worriedly, her lips pursed slightly as she saw the forlorn look on his face.

'Hey, Mike, you okay?' she asked, voice carefully casual, keeping her eyes firmly on the road so as not to show the real worry filling her.

Mike had changed so much last year, growing so angry and distant, as if he couldn't stand to be in a world where El wasn't there, unable to let anyone else close to him, as if he was afraid to lose them too. But she had finally gotten him back, the little brother who was an annoying know-it-all, who drove her crazy most the time, but who she loved and had missed. She couldn't handle losing him again.

Mike jolted, shaken from his thoughts and glanced up at his older sister, giving her a small, tired smile.

'Yeah, I'm fine, Nance. Just thinking.'

'Me too,' Lucas said from the back-seat, where he was squished

uncomfortably in between Dustin and Will, Max perched on his lap and holding onto the roof for dear life as they bumped along the road, 'I still can't believe that El's never had a Christmas before.'

'What?' Nancy said, her eyes widening as she glanced at them in the rear-view mirror, horrified.

'Yup,' Max nodded, shaking her head sadly at the thought of never having actually experienced the excitement of waking up on Christmas day, knowing Santa had come the night before, the magic that had faded long ago but that Max knew she would never forget. The fact that El had never experienced any of it, that she would never feel that child-like wonder made her throat burn, tears unexpectedly filling her eyes.

'She's probably never even had a real present before', Will said, his wide brown eyes sad, 'Or the chance to believe in Santa.'

Mike sighed, before he suddenly sat up straighter, almost banging his head against the roof of the car, as a sudden idea popped into his head, causing excitement to run riot inside his stomach. A smile, the first real one he'd had since he had learned the truth about where she'd really been last year, erupting across his face. He clipped his seat-belt off, ignoring Nancy telling him to put it back on, turning around to grin at his friends.

'So let's give her one.'

'What?' Dustin said, poking his head out from behind Max's elbow, having been pushed against the window for the last ten minutes, confused.

'El never got to have a real Christmas so why don't we give her one? We could do all the things we used to do as kids and show her everything she never got to do before.'

They stared at him for a long moment, stunned by the idea for a long moment because when had they ever organised a Christmas before, when their faces suddenly erupted into smiles as wide as his own, bouncing excitedly as they all began to speak at once, until the car was a loud buzz of almost unintelligble noise.

'Oh my god, that is the seriously the coolest idea...'

'....we need to find a way to get El to come out into the snow...I bet she would love sledding and building snow man...'

'...I have so many Christmas snacks she could try...I wonder if Hopper would let us taste Eggnog if we said it was for El...'

'Guys we only have six days!'

'And we need to come up with the best gifts...should we do secret santa or just buy gifts for everyone?'

'...do you reckon she would like a sling-shot....'

'So what activities are you all going to do with her?' Nancy said, raising her voice over the chaos, letting out a quiet laugh as they turned to look at her, identical thoughtful looks on their faces, before they turned and began to whisper together, the planning for Operation Christmas For El having officially begun.

## 2. Christmas Tree, Oh Christmas Tree...

**Notes for the Chapter:**

> Hey everyone!!! Ahh this reviews have made me so happy! Please keep them coming! It makes all the work so so worth it! Okay, anyways, so I wasn't going to post a new chapter until tomorrow. The plan was to post a chapter every second day until Christmas Eve (well, my Christmas Eve anyways- Australia is one day ahead) and it still is but I realised I had a spare chapter so here it is! :D. I hope you love it! This is one of my favourite chapters, and one of the first I came up with xx

'How the hell are we going to convince Hopper to let us do this?' Dustin asked, lifting his head from where he laid it on the D & D table half an hour before, barely stifling a yawn as they all looked at the final product of the long hours they'd spent planning Operation Christmas for El, the brightly decorated white paper where Will had painstakingly drawn candy canes and wreaths around the border.

They'd all been up half the night planning together on their Supercoms, throwing out ideas and deciding which ones to keep until they had enough to fill out the whole next five days, finally signing off and going to sleep at three in the morning. They had reconvened that morning, every one of them with dark circles under their eyes, yawning continuously but still buzzing with excitement and anticipation. The only obstacle to their master-plan was Hopper.

Lucas glanced over at Mike from where Max and him were leaning against each other, propping the other up and continuously pinching each other's arms to keep them awake.

'Dustin has a point. He said we were only allowed out there twice a week and there's no way we could do all this in two days!'

'We've already lost one day because of yesterday,' Max pointed out, her face falling slightly at the realisation.

Mike huffed out an annoyed breath, tugging on his hair as he pushed off from the table and began to pace across the basement, trying to think of a solution, any way that they could convince Hopper to change his mind.

Will watched him walk back and forth, chewing on the end of the bright green pencil in his hand thoughtfully before his eyes lit up and he sat up straighter, turning to Mike.

'Why don't we ask my Mom? She'd probably be able to figure out a way to get him to say yes.'

Mike's frown faded away, a grin replacing it as he nodded, trying not to get to hopeful but Mrs. Byers...she seemed to have Hopper wrapped around her little finger. If anyone could convince him it was definitely her.

'Come on, let's go ring her,' he said, tone enthusiastic as they both ran up the stairs to call her, dashing past a startled Karen Wheeler who was just going to wake Holly up for breakfast, stunned to learn that five teenagers had already taken over her house at....8.50 in the morning?

She shook her head after a few seconds, sighing, and continuing up the stairs, knowing even if she asked she probably wouldn't get a straight answer from Mike anyways. It was better to just let him do whatever he was doing. As long as he didn't set fire to the house or get arrested, how could she complain?

After their phone call with Mrs. Byers, the five teenagers made their way to the police station in the middle of town, barely managing to sneak past Flo as she turned around to answer the phone, and ambushed Hopper in his office.

He glanced up, thick eyebrows rising up his forehead as he found the five teenagers standing in front of him, faces set in varying expressions of determination, and could only set his coffee mug down with a sigh.

Well, there goes my fifteen minutes of silence, he thought, resting his arms on the table, expression resigned as he looked at them

expectantly.

'Jesus, what is it this time?'

All their eyes turned to Mike, Dustin nudging him forward with a sharp jab of his elbow. Mike rubbed at his side, elbowing Dustin back with an annoyed scowl, before stepping forward, his chin rising into the air as he faced Hopper head-on.

'We want to teach El about Christmas.'

Hopper blinked at him for a second, stunned silent. Well, whatever he'd been expecting it definitely hadn't been that, he thought, scratching at his beard.

'Okay...sure. And you need my permission for that because....?'

'Because...uh...sir....we have a whole list of activities we want to take her to do...but we won't be able to do them all in one day. We were....hoping that you would drop the whole two day rule. Just for this week', Lucas said, his voice shaking with nerves as he eyed the chief anxiously.

Uh-huh, there it is, Hopper thought, leaning back in his chair with another sigh.

'I'm sorry, guys, but you know that's not possible. It's too dangerous....'

'I know what you're going to say, Chief, but we really have it all planned out. We could do all of the activities at either the cabin or my house. Mom has already said she's okay with it. There would always be an adult around, either Mom or Nancy or Jonathan. All you would have to do is sneak El over early in the morning, and we would all be really careful, I swear. We'd all come and leave at different times and my house is really far from everything else so no-one would be able to see or hear us. Plus the guys come over all the time so no-one would think anything weird about it,' Will said, outlining the plan his Mom and him had come up with on the phone.

Joyce had suggested they specifically mention the adult supervision part and the safety precautions they'd take, knowing the fact that

they'd thought it out would at least make him consider the idea.

Hopper blew out an annoyed breath, eyes narrowing slightly.

'Of course she bloody did,' he muttered under his breath. Bloody turn-coat she was. She had known they were coming to ambush him and didn't even call to warn him. She was probably having a good laugh about it right now, he thought, shaking his head in disgust at himself as he actually began to consider the idea.

God, what was he turning into? When did he become such a softy? He should have known these kids would try to find a way around his two day rule. And he could tell from the stubborn looks on their faces that they would find a way to do this with or without his okay, their need to show El everything she had missed out on written all over them. Especially the Wheeler kid, who was looked like he wanted to take another swing at him, his jaw clenched so tight Hopper was surprised he hadn't broken a tooth yet.

He should say no. A stronger man would be able to but...wasn't he only thinking the other day that he hated that he had to keep her locked away again? Hated keeping her from all the experiences she yearned to have, from school, going to the arcade, swimming and running around wild with her friends in the summer, going to the movie theatre, and just getting the chance to be a normal kid. She deserved all of it and if these pain in the ass kids had found a way to give her a tiny bit of it...even something as small as teaching her about Christmas...well who was he to deny her that? And they weren't even technically asking to take her out of hiding, just to Joyce's where he knew she'd be as safe as if she was with him.

Mike felt his frustration growing with every second that Hopper didn't speak, shifting anxiously from foot to foot, his hands curling into fists. He was just opening his mouth to either yell at or beg him....he wasn't entirely sure which one....ready to use the 'you owe me for keeping her a secret for so long' card when Hopper finally sighed, pinching at the bridge of his nose. He let out a muttered curse, before looking up and pinning them with a glare that had all of them stilling, holding their breath hopefully.

'Fine. You can do it. But there are going to be rules. You all turn up at

the cabin or Joyce's at different times each day, and take different routes each time. And you tell no-one where your going. I don't care what lie you have to tell your parents but make something up. And if anything goes wrong...if you see anything strange or even some person you don't know hanging around you tell someone immediately. If anything else goes wrong we cancel everything immediately. Got it?' he said, stabbing a finger in their direction, nodding, satisfied, when they all quickly nodded their heads, a chorus of 'yes sirs' filling the air.

They all grinned at each other excitedly, spinning around to rush out the door, ready to get started on their plan. Mike sent Hopper a grateful look as he reached the door, his smile sheepish as he saw the knowing look on his face, realising that Hopper had probably known exactly what he was thinking the whole time, his cheeks flushing.

'Thank you, sir', he said, joining the line to leave.

'Whoa, whoa, hold up all of you. I'm going to need a whole list and schedule of what you're going to be up to this week so I can organise it with Joyce. What's first on the agenda?' he asked, lifting his coffee, now lukewarm, to his mouth.

They all exchanged a look before Will rummaged in the backpack hanging over his shoulder, carefully pulling out the list and sliding it across to him on the desk. Hopper paused when he saw the smug looks on their faces, slowly lowering his coffee again nervously as he leant forward to study the list. The very detailed and extravagant plan for the week, including a few activities he definitely wouldn't have agreed to if he'd seen it first. Something they clearly knew, if the self-satisfied looks on their faces was any indication.

What the hell did I just agree to? he thought, running a hand over his face before glancing up at them with a heavy, resigned sigh.

'Okay then. What's first?'

Mike walked over to the side of the desk, grinning widely as he pointed a finger at the first word sprawled across the paper, almost shaking with pride and excitement as he proudly proclaimed, 'Tree.'

***

'I honestly don't know how I keep getting dragged into this shit,' Steve muttered into his scarf, grimacing at the way his jeans were soaking into his skin as he struggled his way through the snow that was slowly inching it's way up to his knees. His teeth were clacking together painfully with how hard they were chattering and he was pretty sure he was getting frostebite in his fingers and all because of a damn tree!

A tree these morons could have just bought at the tree market like normal people. But of course that hadn't been good enough when he'd suggested it and here they were almost four hours later still looking for a damn tree. Any of the thousands he was certain they'd passed in the last hours had seemed good but no, it had to be perfect!

He muttered under his breath, ignoring the half-exasperated, half-amused look the dipshits were sending him, hating that they'd known all they had to do was suggest he wasn't "man" enough to cut down a tree to con him into joining them on this stupid "quest".

'It's cause you love us, Stevie-boy', Dustin said cheerfully, expression almost gleeful as he practically skipped through the snow beside him, excitement all over his face that was flushed from the cold, his beanie almost popping off his head, unable to contain his wild curls.

Steve pulled a face, adjusting his hold on the axe that swung by his side with fingers that were feeling alarmingly numb.

'Pfft...I barely tolerate you dipshits'.

The others all rolled their eyes at him, not believing as they continued walking through the woods, stopping every now and then to study a tree intensely before collectively shaking their heads and moving onwards again, to Steve's growing frustration.

'Yeah that's why you've started joining us for D & D, and pick us up from school....oh and take us for pizza on Friday nights...' Lucas said, tone sarcastic, ticking them off on his fingers.

'Oh shut up. That's all for you, not for me.'

'It's okay, Steve, we believe you,' Max said, patting his shoulder in mock-sympathy as she walked past, eyes lit up with amusement.

Remind me again why I like these idiots, Steve thought, rolling his eyes to the sky heavy with thick, grey clouds.

They had grown on him, he supposed...kind of like a growth or a leech that had latched onto him and he was stuck with now. But if he was being honest with himself, he kind of liked being stuck with them. Liked the way they asked him for advice (well...mostly Dustin and mostly about girls), how Will gave him drawings and how they'd welcomed him into their D & D campaigns, Mike even assigning him his own character. Even Max had warmed up to him, calling whenever her brother was being a dick and she wanted to drive around with someone she trusted. He was alone more than not lately since his break up with Nancy. He didn't hang out with Tommy and Carol anymore since they're fight last year and just usually sat in his car during breaks at school, and his parent's definitely weren't around, and even when they were they barely spoke to him. Having the kids invite him to stuff...it made him feel welcome, wanted and needed in a way he hadn't felt in a long time. He loved the dorks, though he'd never say it aloud. To anyone.

Though he could really live without being dragged out into the snow in the middle of the December or the constant, unrelenting teasing and smart-ass comments, and the chauffeuring he somehow got roped into all the time, he couldn't really begrudge them help with this. It's not any of them had the strength to cut down a tree or carry it themselves and really the fact that they were going to all this effort for their friend...freezing their asses off in the woods just to find her the perfect first Christmas tree...well he definitely hadn't had any friends like that growing up. The way they loved each other...selflessly and unconditionally, willing to fight whoever or whatever threatened them....yeah, he could be stuck with worse kids.

And he definitely couldn't begrudge helping Mike. Mike who had changed so much last year after he'd lost their friend, though Steve was pretty sure she was more than a friend to him. He'd grown so sullen and angry, snapping at everyone, withdrawing from the world, preferring to sit in the basement by himself then spend time with his friends, clutching that walkie talkie ('Supercom', he corrected himself,

almost hearing Dustin's exasperated voice in his head). It had been as if he'd just given up, not seeing the point of doing anything without her there to share it with. Like something inside of him had broken, dying alongside her.

And then she had returned, walking through the Byer's front door with blood dripping from her nose, expression fierce, and looking so bad-ass even Steve had been impressed, despite the confusion that had quickly filled him, not understanding why everyone had stopped. Looking bad-ass that is until she saw Mike and everything changed, her face falling into one of pure happiness as they rushed into each other's arms, both crying in relief, and in that moment you could almost see the broken thing in Mike heal itself. He was back to the same happy, smart-ass kid he'd been before, doing well in school and spending time with his friends, the weight of her loss lifted from his shoulders, able to live again in a world where he knew she was safe and alive.
So it hadn't surprised him in the least when Dustin had admitted that Mike had been the one to come with this whole plan.

Though Steve had never met her properly, never spoken an actual word to her- to El, he reminded herself, formerly known as Eleven and once an experiment being held in Hawkins's lab, a fact that he couldn't quite process, so mind-blowingly insane he didn't think he'd ever actually process it completely, who had telekinetic powers she'd used to take down not one but two monsters and save the world- he could tell Mike would do anything in the world to make her happy. He looked at her like she was most incredible thing in the world...like she was his own personal sun.

Steve almost wanted to warn him like he had Dustin to not fall for her, not wanting him to get his heart broken like he had....but he knew there was really no need. Because from the way El had thrown herself into his arms last month when they'd reunited, tears running down her cheeks, and the adoring way they both looked at each other, and not to mention the way she'd almost planted one on Mike in front of everyone without a single care, it was clear that she felt the exact same way.

'Come on, Mike, just pick a tree already. It's freezing out here,' Lucas complained loudly, rubbing his arms, breath fogging out in a thick

white mist.

Max rolled her eyes at Lucas, grinning widely as she shoved a handful of snow down his shirt, cackling when he let out a high-pitched squeal of surprise.

'You're such a girl, Stalker.'

Lucas narrowed his eyes at her, grabbing a handful of his own and began to chase her, laughing as she threatened him panickily, letting out a loud screech as he shoved the snow into her face with a loud laugh.

'You look like the abominable snow-man'.

Mike whirled around from where he leading the pack, arms crossed over his chest as he shook his head furiously, face stubborn.

'I can't just pick any tree! It's for El's first Christmas. It has to be perfect. Go home if you want too.'

Will, who had been walking along with Mike, carefully studying every tree Mike insisted they stop to look at with his artists eye, sighed as he and Lucas began to bicker, voices rising with every exchange.

He could understand why Lucas was getting frustrated but he agreed with Mike. After everything El had done for them....and especially for Will himself, saving him not once but twice from monsters from another dimension, selflessly putting herself at risk each time for someone she hadn't even met, she deserved the best tree they could find her.

Will walked ahead of them, his eyes narrowed as he looked around the shadowy forest, inching off the train tracks before he stopped, eyes lighting up, a wide smile curving his lips as he saw a shape barely peeking out from behind another larger tree. This was it, he thought, and swung around excitedly towards the group.

'Mike!' he said, raising his voice so he could be heard of their bickering that had reached an almost epic level of sound, 'What about this one?'

Mike turned around, the furious glare that had formed on his face, falling away as he saw where Will was pointing, a huge grin stretching his cheeks as he ran forward to stand beside Will, eyes wide as they both stared at the tree.

Will was right, he thought, a rush of excitement filling his chest, this was the one. The one they'd been looking for. It was small, definitely not as big as the one he already had in his house, that went all the way up to the roof, but it was just the right size for Hopper's tiny cabin, perfectly symmetrical with a sharp point at the top for a star. El was going to love it.

'This is definitely the one', he said, grinning in thanks at Will who nodded back, knowing how much it meant to Mike, and they all run towards the tree, looking at it from every angle, talking over one another, Lucas and Mike's fight forgotten in their excitement.

'Okay. Let's get this thing down. Hand me the axe, Steve,' Dustin said, holding his hand out expectantly to Steve.

Steve snorted, shooting him a look that clearly said 'nice try, loser.'

'Yeah, as if, Henderson. All of you move back. I don't want to have to explain to your parent's why you're suddenly missing a foot
or something,', he said, pushing through the crowd and shoving them back before he hefted the axe off his shoulder, giving one big swing and then another as he began to hack at the trunk.

They all cheered him on, calling out a mix of insults and encouragements to keep him going as Steve swung the axe over and over, breath coming out in heavy, winded puffs as little by little the tree began to topple to the side. When it finally fell with a loud crack into the snow they let out a loud cheer, swarming around it while Steve leant on his knees for a few minutes, trying to catch his breath, wiping at the sweat that had pooled on his forehead with his arm.

When he no longer felt like he was lungs were about to catch fire he shoved the axe into Max's hands, the only one of the little shits that he (barely) trusted not to accidentally cut their or anyone else's limbs off, and bent down to grab the front of the tree, hauling it upwards.

'Come on, shit-heads, I'm not carrying this thing all the way to the cabin by myself. Get your asses over here.'

They carried it the half-mile to Hopper's, all puffing and red-cheeked, sweating profusely by the time they reached the cabin, barely avoiding the trip-wire, Will almost running right through it. Mike felt a sudden rush of energy as he saw the light shining behind the closed blinds and let go of his part of the tree, ignoring everyone's groans and teasing, and rushed up the stairs, taking them two at a time, before quickly performing the secret knock El had taught him over the Supercom a few weeks ago.

Knock twice. Pause. Knock once. Pause. Knock three times.

There was silence on the other side of the door for a moment, before the blinds rustled slightly and Mike could barely make out one large brown eye peering at him suspiciously before it widened and disappeared. He grinned as the locks on the door clicked and the door sprung open, revealing El standing there with a wide, excited smile curving her lips. She threw herself into Mike's arm's eagerly, so fast he almost went flying down the stairs, but he didn't mind, laughing as he righted them both, wrapping his arms tight around her shoulders.

'Hey El. Miss me?'

'Mike?' she said, voice surprised, before looking over his shoulder, her eyes growing even wider, practically vibrating with excitement as she saw all her friends standing in front of the cabin. However, a small frown began to form between her eyebrows as she looked at them, confusion and worry quickly replacing the excitement.

'What are you doing here? Does Hopper know?' she asked, looking behind them nervously, suddenly worried he would jump out from behind one of those trees and catch them there.

If Hopper found that they'd broken his rules they would get in trouble and might not be able to visit anymore. They knew that they could only come two days a week so why were they there? Had something happened?

'Yeah. Don't worry, El, we went and asked him to make an exception....uh...change his mind about the rule for just this week,' Dustin said, letting out a cry as he accidentally let go off his end of the tree and it landed on his big toe, jumping up and down as he hissed, 'Sonofabitch', which Mike quickly told her she couldn't say around Hopper.

El's eyes somehow got even bigger as she finally took notice of the tree being dragged behind all of them, her mouth hanging open.

'What is that?'

'It's a tree,' Lucas said, patting the trunk proudly, shooting Mike a pointed look, smirking at him, 'the "perfect" tree, right Mike?'

Mike blushed bright, glaring at Lucas and sneakily giving him the finger so El won't see. He grinned when El rolled her eyes at Lucas, giving him a 'well duh' look that was so sassy it made them all blink, before she walked down the steps to have a closer look at the tree, brushing her bare fingers along the pine leaves. She pulled a face when a sticky substance stuck to her fingers as she pulled them back, looking at them with a grimace before quickly wiping it off on her jeans.

'I know it's a tree but why do you have it?'

'Oh....right! Well it's a....' Lucas began, tone sheepish, before he was quickly interrupted by Mike, who had walked down beside El, cheeks flushed with anticipation.

'It's a Christmas tree, El. We brought it here just for you.'

El's breath came out in a surprised gasp, pressing a hand to her mouth.

'For me?' she asked, voice awed and almost disbelieving as she reached out to touch the tree again almost reverently.

'Yeah! After you told us you've never had a Christmas yesterday we all started to think and we came up with a whole plan on how to give you the best first Christmas ever', Max said, smiling brightly up at El from where she standing in the middle of the group, red hair swaying

with her enthusiastic nodding.

'We have a huge list of things to do until the 25th', Dustin added, grinning when El's face lit up.

'And first on that list is decorating a tree. We have a ton of boxes full of decorations and lights and stuff for it.'

El's heart was beating wildly in her chest, and she was pretty sure she'd never been this happy, her cheeks aching with how wide her smile was. She was going to get to spend five whole days with her friends learning about Christmas. Her very first one. And they had gotten a tree just for her.

She felt her throat tighten slightly, tears beginning to fill her eyes but they were quickly jolted away when a voice El didn't recognise spoke up, tone irritated.

'I get that you are all excited and shit but can we freaking do this inside. I'm freezing my arse off out here.'

El jumped, her eyes jumping to the tall boy with the pretty hair that was standing at the front of the group, eyeing him warily, having not noticed him before in her excitement at seeing her friends again so soon. She was sure she'd seen him before but she wasn't certain where....wait, wasn't he at Joyce's when she'd came back?

'Sorry, we forgot how old you are, Steve. Going on about fifty now, right?' Dustin said, smirking when Steve swung around to glare at him, narrowing his eyes.

'The cold getting into your old bones a bit easier now?' Lucas said as well, laughing when Steve let out an offended huff.

'Hardy-Ha. Smart-asses', he muttered under his breath, rolling his eyes.

Steve, El thought, her wariness fading slightly as she recognised the name. The boy Dustin was always talking about, who had helped them fight the Demodogs and distract the Mind flayer when she had been trying to close the gate. Nancy's old friend.
She looked at him for another long moment before walking carefully

up the stairs and pushing the door open, stepping back to let them in.

El watched them struggle to fit the tree through the tiny door, swearing loudly as it got stuck halfway, her lip twitching with amusement as Will complained loudly about scraped knuckles. She may have used her powers to give it a little bit of a push, grinning when it easily popped out from the doorway, subtly wiping at her dripping nose with her sleeve to hide her help when they all smiled, pleased with their efforts as they placed the tree next to the television.

El jerked her head at the couch, making it slide across the room with her powers to give everyone more room. Steve let out a little screech as the couch skidded away from him which he quickly tried to cover up with a cough, ignoring Lucas, Dustin and Mike's raised eyebrows and cocky grins.

El giggled at his reaction as she walked across the room towards Mike, leaning her head against his arm. Mike glanced down at her with a soft look, wrapping his arm around her shoulder, giving her a quick squeeze and gentle smile that El returned, ducking her head shyly.

Will and Max exchanged wide-eyed looks at seeing the almost casual show of her powers, having not seen it as much as the others, before grinning widely, barely able to hold back giddy laughs.

'So cool,' Max mouthed to him, and Will nodded in agreement, mouthing back, 'I know right?' before turning back to watch as Steve wrestled the tree into it's stand with more muffled swearing and frustrated groaning before standing up to look at their work (more like his work- damn shits owed him), nodding sharply with satisfaction at the way it sat, the tip sitting just below the roof.

'Good call, little Byers,' he said, ruffling his hair proudly as Will blushed, his tiny crush on Steve causing his reaction, 'Just the right fit. You too, Mike. At least your stubborn ass is good for something.'

He ruffled Mike's hair as well, but Mike jerked out from under his hands with a irritated scowl, before turning his eyes back to El who was staring at the tree, a smile so bright and big on her face that it

made his heart clench, face softening as he took her hand in his.

'Do you like it?'

She nodded.

'It's pretty.'

'We haven't even got started yet,' Dustin laughed, turning towards the door, grabbing Steve and Will by the shirts to drag them back out into the snow with him, 'Come on, guys, we've gotta go grab the decorations. We'll be right back, El!'

Everyone had eagerly pillaged their families collection of decorations, donating different pieces that they thought El would like. They all rummaged through the boxes when Dustin, Steve and Will came back, El holding piece carefully in her hands, studying each other intensely for so long that it took a while for them to empty the boxes but none of them minded, wanting her to enjoy the moment as much as possible.

Will plugged the lights in before they got started to make sure they still worked and El's eyes lit up as she saw the way they glowed in the muted darkness of the cabin, touching a blue bulb with a single finger.

'Mom bought heaps of these last year when...uh...when everything happened and we have way to many now so I brought a bunch over for the tree, and maybe you could even hang them around the cabin', he told her, voice shaking slightly as he stared at the multi-coloured lights, lights he had once used to communicate with and save his Mom from the Demogorgon, spelling the word R-U-N.

El's face fell as she saw the way Will looked at the lights, at the nightmares that they had both experienced began to swarm to life inside his eyes, darkening them, and walked towards him, squeezing his hand. He glanced down at her, his body which had gone stiff with panic relaxing slightly as he saw the understanding on her face, remembering with a start that she knew exactly what he was feeling when he looked at the lights. They'd never spoken about it, not out loud, but just knowing that someone else knew how it felt...what it

had been like...it helped.

He squeezed her hand back.

'Thank you,' he whispered, just quiet enough for the two of them to hear, and El nodded, expression serious.

'It's okay. Could...do you think we could put them in my room?' she asked, voice hopeful.

Will laughed, his momentary forgotten by the enthusiasm in her voice and nodded.

'You can hang them wherever you want.'

They turned the lights back off, wanting El to get the full effect of the tree when it completely decorated and eagerly got to work. They all took turns picking decorations while El quietly decided where they should go, lips pursed in careful thought, before silently pointing at where she thought it would look best. They all placed them there happily. Max and Lucas were in charge of putting the lights on the tree, lights they happily draped on every branch, so many of them covering the limbs that Steve would certain it was going to catch alight the second they turned it on. Not wanting to have to explain to what would certainly be a murderous Hopper why his cabin burnt down, he quickly pulled a few strands off when they weren't looking.

None of the decorations really matched, a clashing of tiny glass angels, Santa's, Nutcrackers, and sleighs, candy-canes and snowman, baubles of every shape and colour, red, greens, blues, silver and even one bright pink one

'My Mom has terrible taste in decorations', Max muttered when they all stared at the hot pink bauble slightly horrified, cheeks growing bright red.

The heat quickly faded from her cheeks when El let out an excited squeal as she caught sight of the bauble, grabbing it out of Max's hand and putting it front and centre in the middle of the tree, Max smirking at the boys for their teasing.

The tree was eventually so wound up in layers of light and tinsel that

they could barely see any green of the leaves but El loved it.
Mike wound some bright red tinsel around El's neck like a scarf, blushing when she beamed at him. He quickly let out a cry of surprise and outrage as Will dumped a whole box on top of his head, and then it was on. They all ran around the tiny cabin, knocking chairs over as they went, until every surface and bit of floor was covered in tiny specks of green and red tinsel.

Steve shook his head at them, amused, as he hung lights from the roof with Dustin's help, who had somehow gotten the lights tangled around his entire body and had to hop from wall to wall to El's delight, laughing uncontrollably at the sight. They strung lights from every doorframe and piece of furniture they could until there was no more to hang, Steve letting out a sigh of relief and stretching as he finally jumped down from the chair he'd been perched on, flinging himself down onto the chair, his hair flopping into his eyes as he high-fived Dustin for their spectacular work.

Lucas, Will and Mike all lifted El up so she could place the bright gold star that Will had made himself from gold paper and glitter onto the very top limb, adding the finish touch.

'Hopper is literally going to kill us,' Mike said, looking around with wide-eyes at the chaos from where they all lay on the floor in a circle, hair tangling together and not one part of them not touching someone else. El lay beside him, her fingers clutching his, the bright smile she'd been unable to keep off her since they'd first revealed their plan only growing as she shook her head, squeezing his fingers comfortingly.

'I won't let him. Don't worry.'

'Yeah, don't worry, Mike. We have our own personal Super-El to protect us,' Lucas said, reaching over to high-five El, who just eyed his hand like it was going to bite her, making them all laugh as Lucas sighed, grabbing her arm gently and slapping her palm against his to demonstrate.

El frowned, not entirely sure what the gesture meant, but shrugged, lifting her head to look up at the brightly dressed tree.

'It's so pretty,' she sighed happily, leaning her head against Mike's shoulder as he sat up beside her, pressing his lips to her curls.

'It sure is,' he said, staring down at her, a soft look on his face.

El glanced up at him, blushing when she saw he was looking at her and not the tree when he spoke, sensing what he was actually telling her, and leaned forward to peck his lips with hers.

'Ugh,' Max groaned, pretending to gag, 'Enough of the PDA guys! There are other people around you know.'

'Yeah, get a room,' Dustin said, covering his eyes with his hands jokingly.

'We could go to my room,' El said eagerly, going to rise to her feet, wanting to show Mike her room properly for the first time, proud that she finally had one of her own.

Mike choked on his own saliva at her words, going bright red as the others burst out laughing, even Steve who was sitting sprawled at the kitchen table.

Will pulled her back down gently, seeing the confused and slightly hurt look on her face and patted her back.

'Don't worry, El. They're just being silly. They're not laughing at you.'

'Get a room means...something different?' she asked slowly, nose crinkling in confusion as she turned to Mike for confirmation.

Mike's cheeks somehow got even redder, feeling so hot he thought they might actually be able to heat up the whole cabin, but he moved in closer, taking her hand, ignoring the others fresh laughter.

'Yeah it does but you don't have to worry about that just yet. I'll...I'll explain it later, okay?'

El nodded after a minute, a little annoyed at not understanding but satisfied that Mike would keep his promise and explain it to her. He always did.

'So are you ready to see it all lit up, El?' Mike asked, eager to change the subject. He reluctantly moved out of her grip and wiggled under the tree, reaching for the switch to the turn the lights on. He turned his head, ducking as a limb threatened to poke him in the eye, not wanting to miss her reaction, his heart racing in his chest.

El nodded enthusiastically, sitting upright, clutching her knees as she waited, holding her breath in anticipation as her entire body seemed to tingle from head to toe, hands trembling slightly.

She gasped as the tree was suddenly lit up, her breath catching in her throat, staring as the multi-coloured lights twinkled brightly, almost as if they were winking at her. The others let out loud cheers but she barely heard it, crawling forward until her face was inches from the tree, head tilting back, mouth open in awe, her eyes shining.

It was...magnificent, she thought, one of her words of the day from a few weeks ago, one she'd read in one of the many books her friends and Mike had brought her since they'd been reunited. Every part of the tree shone brightly, as if it was shining just for her, lighting up every inch of the cabin.

She felt a warmth spread through her stomach and out towards her fingers and toes as a pair of arms slipped around her waist, tugging her back until she was seated snugly in Mike's lap. She wiggled until her head was tucked under his chin, sighing. Mike nuzzled her curls with his cheek, his lips brushing her ear as he spoke.

'Do you like it?' he whispered just for her and El nodded, wrapping her arms around his where they sat loosely around her waist, hugging him to her.

'I love it, Mike. It's...thank you.'

When he leaned over to look into her eyes upside down, a small confused frown on his face, she smiled and leant forward to kiss his nose gently, not caring that the others were there watching and would probably tease them about it. Neither of them did. They already lost so much time. They weren't going to waste anymore being embarrassed or let anything keep them from showing how they felt about each other.

'I know it was your idea,' she said, softly, her wide brown eyes on his dark ones that gentled as she spoke, 'Thank for you doing this for me. You always make sure I'm happy.'

Mike's heart seemed to swell even bigger, a warmth rushing into his chest as he rubbed his nose against hers. His smile was the crooked one she adored as he gazed down at her, his eyes so full of love that El felt her lips tremble, tears filling her own at the complete adoration in them, the very sight showing everything she felt for him but couldn't quite put into words. Not yet.

'You make me happy too, El.'

Steve cleared his throat loudly, making them both jump and glance over to see the others had busied themselves putting their snow clothes back on. They turned as one to look at the clock, unable to believe it already 6-2.5. It was time for them to go.

The others had walked away to give them some privacy, rolling their eyes at each other at how sickeningly sweet their friends were, but they couldn't quite hold back the smiles that the sight gave them, secretly happy for their friends, who had yearned for each other for so long and were finally able to be together.

'Sorry to break it up, you two, but if I don't get everyone out of here and home soon Hopper might not let us come back. Especially after he sees this mess.'

El deflated, her shoulders slumping forward. She hated that they had to leave already. It felt like only seconds ago they'd knocked on the door, surprising her. She reluctantly moved out of Mike's lap, pulling him to his feet as he slowly rose as well, face annoyed, glaring at Steve, while El pouted.

Steve shook his head at him, patting his shoulder sympathetically as he passed to grab his coat.

'Sorry, Mike, not my rules.'

'Don't worry, El, we're going to be back tomorrow...or at least see you...and the next day as well', Will told her, wrapping his scarf

firmly around his neck.

The pout that had formed on her face fell away as El blinked at them in surprise, having forgotten what they'd told her earlier, too distracted by the sight of the tree.

'Really?' she asked, hope coating her voice. She would get to see her friends three days in a row? Could she really believe it?

Max nodded, grinning at her as she tugged a bright green beanie over her head.

'Yeah. We'll be coming over...or you'll be going to Joyce's everyday till Christmas.'

El jumped and down on the spot, her curls bouncing, causing everyone to laugh.

'What else is on the list?'

'Uh-huh! It's a surprise,' Lucas said, shaking his head with a laugh as El gave him a heavy put-upon sigh, trying to make him feel guilty. 'Not going to work, El.'

El sighed in defeat, before stepping forward to give her friends quick hugs goodbye. Dustin went first, checking cautiously, making sure the coast was clear before walking out into the snow landscape, dark having fallen hours ago.

Mike turned to El as he stood in the doorway beside Steve who was shifting impatiently, glancing pointedly down at his watch. Mike rolled his eyes at him, and El smirked at how adorable he looked in his huge beanie, obviously something Karen Wheeler had knitted for him a long time ago, and his scarf so big it covered most of his mouth.

'I'll see you tomorrow, okay, El,' he said, his words muffled by the cotton.

El nodded, smiling.

'Tomorrow.'

Mike walked backwards out of the house, his eyes on hers, not wanting to look away just yet, until he almost tumbled backwards down the stairs. El slapped a hand to her mouth, barely biting back a laugh as he blushed bright red, giving her a sheepish wave before turning and rushing out into the dark.

Steve stepped out to follow him, muttering under his breath about he was 'going to freeze his balls off', a phrase El wasn't sure she understood, but a tiny, cold hand on his arm made him pause, turning in surprise to see El looking up at him, brown eyes steadfast on his.

They had never been by themselves before, never really even spoke directly to each other, so Steve was surprised when El rose on her toes and pressed a kiss to his cheek, smiling hesitantly.

'Thank you for cutting the tree down,' she said, jerking her head to the axe leaning against the wall of the cabin, which he had almost forgotten.

Steve's usual grin softened into a more genuine smile as he reached over and mussed her wild mass of curls affectionately.

'Anytime, Ellie,' he said, laughing as El frowned at the nickname, pushing her curls back into place, and walked out into the woods, calling back, 'See you later, Super girl.'
**

At exactly 7-0-0 Hopper walked into the cabin and froze, horror written all over his face at the sight in front of him, his eyes bulging to almost comical width as he took in the mess of tinsel and the huge-ass tree that was taking up half the cabin.

'Jesus, did a Christmas special throw up in here?' he asked, tone bewildered, but he found he couldn't work up the energy to be mad. Not when his eyes found El wrapped up in the quilt from her bed on the floor in front of the tree, her face lit up as bright as the Christmas lights that seemed to be draped over every inch of his god-damn cabin, along with bits of tinsel that he was pretty sure he'd been finding in his clothes till July.

Maybe these kids are on to something, he thought, a bit of hope rising inside him as he lowered himself to the ground beside her with a slight groan, wrapping an arm around El's shoulders.

'Have a good day, kid?'

El nodded happily before turning her soft brown eyes to his.

'Thank you. For letting them come.'

Hopper's face softened, squeezing her shoulder gently.

'It's okay kid. If anyone deserves this, it's you,' he told her.

And that's where they stayed for the rest of the night, El drinking hot chocolate and Hopper nursing a beer as they watched the lights flash and twinkle brightly, snow falling silently out the window. They barely spoke, just content to sit silently together, enjoying the peace both of them had been denied for so long.

**Notes for the Chapter:**

> What did everyone think? Can't wait to hear from you all as always xoxo- Katie

# 3. Gingerbread

**Notes for the Chapter:**

> HEY GUYS!! So here it is, chapter three!!! Thanks for all the amazing chapters over the last few days! :D You are all the best. I hope you like the newest chapter. As the title suggests it's all about gingerbread ;)

Hopper dropped El off at Joyce's during his lunch break the very next day, flat-out refusing to have all those 'damn kids', as he'd grumbled repeatedly throughout the night as El and him had cleaned the mess of tinsel and pine needles scattered everywhere through the house, at his cabin three days in a row. It taken them over three hours of sweeping to get of all it clear, and even then, he'd still found a bit of tinsel in his coffee that morning, almost choking on it, and making El giggle uncontrollably at the shocked look on his face, before he'd given a resigned sigh and muttered into his coffee for the rest of the morning, '...this parenting thing is going to kill me'.

'Here ya go, kid,' he said as he pulled up in front of the house, parking before he turned to look at her, biting back a smile at the way she was squirming in her seat, obviously impatient to get out and see her friends, 'I'll be back at five sharp to pick you up.'

El nodded her understanding quickly, and eagerly pushed the door open, almost falling out of the cruiser in her haste as she rushed up the steps to the front door. The smile on her face was so wide it was almost splitting her cheeks, anticipation thrumming through her, excited to find out what the surprise was for today.

She'd been reading all about Christmas in a book that Hopper had found for her in the crawl space beneath the cabin, one that she knew must have belonged to Sarah and made sure to be very careful with, and had been stunned by the many activities you could during Christmas. All of them sounded almost...magical. Like something out of a dream. She couldn't wait to try them all one day.

She knocked on the door loudly, turning to wave goodbye to Hopper

as he backed down the drive. Hopper lifted his hand at her, a smile on his grizzly face as he saw how happy she was for once, almost shaking with her excitement, before he turned off and disappeared down the road.

The door swung open abruptly and Will stood in the doorway grinning at her, wearing a white jumper with what El now knew was a reindeer on it. He took her arm gently and tugged her into the house, glancing behind her cautiously for a second to make sure no-one was watching, before closing it behind them.

'Hey El', he said, as she unravelled her blue scarf from around her neck, his light brown eyes almost dancing with joy, as he grabbed her hand again and began to pull her deeper into the house, 'Everyone's already in the kitchen. Come on. You're going to love today's idea.'

El cocked her head at him curiously for a second, before shrugging and letting him tug her away from the doorway, lifting her hand to wave at Jonathan when they passed him where he sat on the floor sorting through a bunch of photographs he'd taken at the Snow Ball. He gave her a shy smile, giving an awkward wave back, ducking his head and turning back to his work.

They walked into the kitchen to find their friends already sitting at the table, perched precariously on their chairs as they leant towards each other, talking over another so loudly El could barely make out what they were saying. The table wobbled dangerously under their combined weights, groaning in a way that made El worried it would tip over at any second, taking them all down with it.

'You have to wait how long for it to set? Argh, that's so boring! Why didn't we buy already assembled ones again?'

'Oh my god, Dustin, you're such a grinch. You can't buy assembled ones. The whole point is to build it', Mike said, shaking his head at his friend with a put-upon sigh, smiling at Dustin to show he's joking.

'I am not,' Dustin cried, face offended as he pouted at Will, eyes pleading for help, as he sat back down in front of him, 'Tell them I'm not a Grinch.'

'He may not be a Grinch, but he's definitely a girl. It only takes an hour for it to set. What, you can't wait an hour?' Max teased, raising an eyebrow at him.

'No!'

'Stop picking on Dustin, guys', Will defended him, and grinned when Dustin beamed at him, patting his back affectionately.

'See! Will's the only good one of you all.'

'I take offence to that,' Lucas said, sticking his tongue out at Dustin, grinning when Dustin gave him the finger.

Lucas jumped in surprise when he spotted El watching them at the end of the table with a perplexed look on her face, smiling in welcome.

'Oh, hey El.'

Mike's snapped towards her so fast his neck ached slightly, heart racing as he saw El standing there, looking beautiful in a long-sleeved white shirt and a pair of jeans, her hair messy from the wind outside, his cheeks stretching up into a wide smile.

He scrambled out of his chair, almost knocking it over as his foot became tangled within it in his haste. His cheeks felt like they were on fire as their friends cracked up behind him, but he couldn't bring himself to care much as El's eyes lit up as she saw him, reaching eagerly for his hand, her fingers slipping between his and tugging him in closer.

'Mike'.

'El', he said, squeezing her hand gently as he pressed his forehead to hers, 'I missed you.'

'Me too,' she said quietly, the secret half-smile he loved tilting up the corner of her mouth as she looked up at him, brown eyes bright with happiness.

'Seriously guys, you only saw each other yesterday. Stop being so

gross', Max said, pulling a disgusted face, though she winked at El to show she was only teasing when she turned to look at everyone, her cheeks pinking.

They both blushed bright red under their friend's amused gazes, hastily walking over to climb onto their seats, El taking the one that Mike had saved just for her right beside him. El shot him a quick smile as she realised what he'd done, causing his blush to only get deeper, dropping his eyes away as he tried to hide the goofy smile that he couldn't quite manage to keep off his face. And didn't really want to.

El glanced curiously around the table, finally able to see what her friend's bodies have been hiding before, and blinked when she found the surface almost entirely covered in bowls of all shapes and sizes, filled with brightly coloured candy she'd never seen before, as well as thick slabs of what she thought was some type of brown food that smelt delicious, sweet and spicy at the same time, making her mouth water.

Her eyebrows drew together as she looked up at her friends for an explanation, beyond confused. Her expression drew a laugh out of everyone before Mike shifted in closer to her, happy, as always, to explain.

'It's gingerbread, El. We're going to make gingerbread houses'.

El's eyes widened, though her frown only seemed to deepen as she stared down at the thick slabs of gingerbread. She had seen pictures of gingerbread houses in the book Hopper had given her but this....this looked nothing like it. How were they going to make houses of this...stuff? she thought, poking the pastry with a dubious finger.

Will laughed at her sceptical expression, shaking his head.

'It's okay, El. We'll show you how to do it. It's really easy once you've done it a few times. You've just got to be really carefully to stick the pieces together with lots of frosting or it'll fall apart'.

'And you have to let it set for an hour for the same reason. Isn't that

right, Dustin?' Max said, fluttering her eyelashes teasingly at Dustin, who crossed his arms over his chest, grumbling under his breath, 'So stupid.'

'Get over it already,' Lucas said, rolling his eyes in exasperation before turning back to El, 'It's totally worth the wait though El, cause then you get to decorate it however you want. We've got heaps of different candy, like gum drops and licorice ropes, candy canes, icing sugar for snow, and even chocolate to make logs.'

'And then the best part. You get to eat it after', Mike said, his eyes lighting up at the thought. He loved gingerbread, it was his favourite holiday treat, and since his Mom wasn't as into the Christmas spirit as she usually was (she was really into anything, honestly, except drinking wine and reading those weird books she always has), this might be his only chance to enjoy it. And he was definitely going to make the most of it.

'I'm not going to make a house,' Max said, leaning back in her chair as she studied the gingerbread, 'I think I'm going to try and make one of the arcade games. Do you think it'll work?'

Dustin's eyes popped open wide as he turned to gape at her.

'That. Is. So. Cool! How are you going to do it?' he asked, before they launched into a huge debate about what kind of techniques to use, how big she wanted to make it, everyone throwing in suggestions loudly and animatedly.

El watched them for a long moment, her face growing thoughtful as she too looked at the gingerbread, before turning to look at Mike.

'Could I make a gingerbread cabin instead of a house? Like home?' she asked, voice hesitant, as if afraid it was a stupid idea.
Mike nodded quickly, the hopeful look in her eyes making his insides melt, squeezing the hand that still hadn't left his since they'd sat down reassuringly.

Home. She said the word so casually, with so much confidence, that it made the tight ball that he had carried since she'd disappear, which was slowly beginning to loosen and fade with every second they

spent together, knowing she was safe, ease slightly. She had a home. A real one with Hopper, one she clearly loved so much she wanted to make it out of gingerbread, a home where she was safe and happy, one where the bad men could never find her, where she was protected. The fact made Mike happier than he knew was possible, even if that home wasn't with him as he'd initially planned. But he knew now that would never have worked, especially not considering the way they both felt about each other. No, this was better. It meant she had Hopper as her dad, Hopper who, even though he seemed grumpy most the time, Mike could tell truly loved El. It was the one thing they both had in common. And anyways, Mike could wait to live with El....something he already knew was going to happen one day in the future when they were older. All he had to do was wait. And as impatient as he usually was, he would do it. He would wait for El. He would always wait for her.

'You can make whatever you want, El', he told her, voice gentle, his dark eyes on hers, stomach jittering slightly at the direction his own thoughts had taken, a little nervous she could read them all over his face. But El just beamed, turning back to eye the gingerbread with such a stubborn, calculating look on her face, as if she was going to war with it, that it startled a laugh out of him, the nerves vanishing.

They all got to work energetically, cutting out the shapes they needed from the thick slabs they'd all poured their money in together to buy, tongues sticking out in concentration. Muttered curses broke the silence occasionally as a piece suddenly cracked or buckled while they formed the structures, sticking them together with an icing gun they shared between them all.

Mike grinned as El slowly began to put together her small cabin, following everyone's directions as she casually used her powers to hold the pieces in place, a small trickle of blood seeping from her nose. She wiped it away on her sleeve distractedly as she quickly swiped the edges with frosting, her nose crinkling adorably in concentration, before turning back to his own work.

El smiled quietly as she saw the finished product almost two hours later, lifting her head to look what her friends had been working on. She'd done it. She'd built her very first gingerbread house, she thought, giddiness rising in her chest.

Lucas's house was looking slightly lopsided, slowly beginning to tilt to the side as he cursed loudly, desperately trying to straighten it. El used her powers to secretly hold it for a second as he stuck a skewer to steady it, his sigh of relief audible in the silence.

Will's was more of a castle than a house, almost identical to the ones in the Disney movies Hopper and her had watched during her first year in hiding, Hopper feigning reluctance as they'd sat down together, though he kept bringing more from the video store. He was already beginning to create a moat around it, his eyes wide with determined focus.

Dustin was just putting together the final piece of his, a small chimney that he was building out of broken up pieces of chocolate, which he would place on top when it was fully set. He grinned up at El as he caught her watching him, showing off his new teeth. And Max's game was already finished and setting, her arms crossed over her chest smugly as she watched the others.

El turned her head to have a look at Mike's and was stunned to see the small tower he was creating, like something out of the D & D campaigns he was teaching her about, painstakingly smoothing out the edges. She leant over to stare at the small windows he'd carved out of the tower, her fingers accidentally squeezing the icing gun that still sat in her hands. She watched, horrified, as a bit of frosting squirted out and landed on Mike's cheek with a loud splat.

Mike let out a small cry of surprise, his wide eyes snapping up to meet El's as she gaped at him, cheeks growing hot with mortified embarrassment.

'Mike...I'm sorry...I didn't mean to...'

Her words quickly broke off into a startled squeal as cold frosting was suddenly smeared across her nose and cheek, sticking in her curls. She gasped in outrage, mouth hanging as she found Mike smirking at her, his eyes dancing with unshed laughter, and his hand sticky with leftovers from the frosting now coating her cheek.

'Fair's fair,' he said, a laugh slipping out at the shocked, indignant look on her face, trying to force his face into serious lines, though he

couldn't help the way his lips continued to twitch, laughter bubbling in his chest.

El snapped out of her shocked stupor as Lucas's loud laughter drew her attention to where he was slumped back against his chair, tears of mirth already filling his eyes.

'Looking good, guys,' he almost cackled, wiping at his face, 'Doing the matching couple thing already'.

El narrowed her eyes at him warningly, but he took no notice, continuing to laugh as a bit of frosting dripped from her cheek and landed on the table. She glanced at the table out of the corner of her eye, smiling inwardly as she found what she was looking for and jerked her head upwards. A bowl silently rose into the air as the others watched, slow grins spreading across their faces, as it slowly began to float towards Lucas, who remained oblivious.

Lucas froze when he felt something nudge his head, his laughter choking off as he glanced nervously upwards and found one of the bowls of icing sugar was hovering over his head. He swallowed hard, turning his head ever so slowly, as if trying not to startle a angry animal. More like an angry El, which was a thousand times scarier than any Demogorgon or Demodogs.

'You wouldn't,' he said, trying to appear threatening, his dark eyes narrowed and silently promising revenge if she even tipped that bowl a tiny bit.

El raised an eyebrow, smirking, before she flicked her chin down and the bowl tipped, the sugar falling in a shower of white all over Lucas's head.

Lucas gaped at her for a long second as the room exploded in laughter, the sound almost deafening.

'Serves you right', Max said between gasps for breath, her face bright red as she clutched at her side, stomach muscles spasming painfully, but she just couldn't stop laughing, bursting into fresh giggles as Dustin fell off his chair as he laughed, landing with a loud thump.

'It suits you Lucas,' Will said, his grin only widening when Lucas gave him the finger, shaking his head from side to side with a disgusted grunt, 'Eugh, it's in my ears.'

Mike laughed, wrapping an arm around El's shoulder proudly.

'No-one messes with our El', he said, high-fiving her as El giggled.

Lucas rose to his feet, an irritated frown marring his face that quickly morphed into a speculative one, smirking as an idea popped into his head. El stilled at the look, growing a bit nervous as she glanced at the others, who had all gone silent as well. He slowly walked forward, reaching over to dip his hand casually into a bowl of icing. He pulled out a handful and pulled it back, ready to throw, narrowing his eyes on her playfully.

'You are so dead, El.'

El lifted her chin into the air, jumping to her feet into a fighting stance, flicking her fingers forward in a gesture that clearly said 'bring it on', like she'd seen in one of the ninja movies Hopper had put on once, grinning back.

And it was all out war.

They all quickly ran for cover, ducking behind chairs and grabbing whatever "weapons" they could find on the table to use. Laughter and war-cry's erupted through the kitchen as they quickly formed teams, Mike and El on one side, and Lucas, Max, Will
and Dustin on the other.

Lucas's handful of frosting ended up in El's hair as she ran for the barricade Mike had hastily made out a couple of chairs tipped over, making it gunk together in a sticky mess that made her look like a porcupine, letting out a disgusted cry. They threw everything they could find, liquorice sticks, gum drops and leftover gingerbread flying through the air, the sounds of squeals, laughter and surprised 'ows' from both sides echoing through the room.

'Hey no powers!' Dustin yelled as they were pelted with a bunch of chocolate buttons as El levitated them over the barrier, sticking his

curly head over the top to glower at them, 'That's cheating!'

'That was never a rule. Not our fault you choose the team without the telekinetic', Mike laughed, throwing another handful of frosting, pulling a sheepish face as he hit Will instead, where he was inching out to grab more ammunition. 'Sorry Will!'

El giggled as she looked at Mike, tugging out the bits of candy that had gotten stuck in his hair.

'This is fun'.

'It really is,' Mike grinned, leaning forward to kiss El's some frosting off of El's nose. She leant forward, rubbing her face against his playfully, smearing some of the frosting on her face on his as he laughed, trying to turn his head away, half-heartedly trying to escape.

'Okay, okay, we give', Max called from across the room, making Mike sigh irritably at being interrupted again, looking over the top of the chairs to see Max cautiously lifting her head slowly over their barrier, waving the edge of the white table cloth as a symbol of a truce.

Mike and El popped their heads out, eyeing them suspiciously in case it was a trick before nodding.

'Truce', they agreed, meeting in the middle to shake hands solemnly.

They all stared at each other for a second, all covered in bits of frosting and candy, crumbs of gingerbread covering their clothes, hair sticking up crazily, before they burst into laughter.

'Oh my god, that was great,' Will said, giggling uncontrollably as he leant against the wall, cheeks red with exertion.

Lucas walked over to El, nudging her with his shoulder as he tugged playfully on one her curls, now matted together with frosting.

'Nice hair, El.'

'You too', she said sassily, his hair now almost grey there was so much sugar in it. They stared at each other for a long moment before

laughing again, collapsing against one another.

Jonathan burst into the room, having heard the screams and war cries from where he'd gone outside to snap a few shots and gaped at the mess in front of him, stunned.

He'd only been gone five minutes. How the hell had that created this much mess in so little time? It was mind-boggling.

'Should I even ask?' he said, shaking his head in disbelief as they turned as one to look at him, all shifting guiltily.

'Lucas started it', Dustin blurted out, folding under the pressure.

Lucas's mouth fell open, crying out indignantly.

'Did not. El started it, not me.'

'Wow, way to tattle. Real mature, Lucas', Max said teasingly, grinning as Lucas spun towards her, a mock-hurt look on his face for her betrayal.

'Dustin told first!'

Mike rolled his eyes at Will who returned the gesture, both of them used to the antics of their friends, before he turned to his brother, giving Jonathan a sheepish smile, trying to look innocent.

'Sorry Jonathan. We'll clean it, we swear.'

'Good to know', Jonathan said, ruffling Will's hair as he walked out, shaking his head. Jesus Christ, remind him to never volunteer to babysit them all at the same time again. How the hell did Steve do it?

They all rushed to clean up before Joyce came home from work, sweeping up the sugar and candy off the floor with a broom and throwing it away, straightening chairs, and quickly settling back at the table with fresh candy and sugar in the bowls, beginning to decorate their creations that had finally set.

'So what do we do now?' El asked curiously as she put the final touch on her cabin, looking to the others for answers.

'Now we finally get to eat it,' Dustin said, bouncing in his chair excitedly as he looked at his creation, before looking up at his friends as an idea popped into his head, 'Hey, I bet I could finish mine before you guys.'

'Pfft...as if, Henderson. I could totally kick your ass in an eating competition,' Max proclaimed, sniffing at the idea as if it was laughable.

'Prove it then,' Dustin said, raising his eyebrows in challenge and Max narrowed her eyes at him.

'Fine, I will'.

'Five bucks on Max,' Lucas whispered loudly to Will, and Will nodded, shaking his hand with a grin, 'Deal.'
Mike was the only one of them who saw El's face fall as she stared at her creation, chin wobbling slightly at the thought of destroying her cabin that she had worked so hard.

'Hey El, you don't have to eat it if you don't want to. If you want to keep it, that's okay as well', he told her gently.

El's face lit up and she nodded, wrapping her arms around the cabin almost protectively.

'I don't want to eat it. I want to show Hopper.'

Mike smiled.

'Okay. We can share mine if you want.'

El beamed, scooting closer until their chairs were pressed together, nudging her shoulder with his in silent thanks. They smiled at each other for a second before turning their attention to where Max and Dustin hand's were now hovering over their houses, ready to begin eating, determined looks on both their faces.

'Okay. Eaters ready?', Will said, standing above them, arm lifted in the air, slashing it down as they both nodded seriously, 'ready...set....GO!'

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Hopper stepped into the cabin at exactly 5.01 and froze on the doorstep, his eyes widening at what he found in front of him.

All six of the teenagers were lying pretty much comatose on the floor, eyes squeezed shut, clutching their stomachs with pained expressions as they rolled on the ground, groaning occasionally without opening their eyes, mumbling unintelligible complaints under their breaths.

'What the hell...' he muttered, inching past them cautiously as he made his way to the kitchen, towards the noise of someone making coffee.

His lip twitched as he found El sprawled on her stomach on the floor nearest to the kitchen, hair matted with what he was pretty sure was frosting, dozing lightly on Mike's shoulder.

Mike opened his eyes as he passed, a panicked look passing over his face as he caught him looking at him, slowly pulling back the hand that was wrapped around El's waist, cheeks flushing in embarrassment about being caught snuggling with the Chief's daughter. This was it, he was definitely going to get murdered. He only wished he wasn't surprised it was by the Chief's hands.

He was surprised when Hopper only nodded him, lips twitching in amusement as if he could read his thoughts, before he disappeared into the kitchen. Mike almost sagged with relief, letting out the breath he'd been holding before lowering himself back down onto the floor, laying his head back down next to El's and closing his eyes with a groan as his stomach protested the movement, almost bursting with the amount of gingerbread they'd eaten.

'What the hell happened to them?' Hopper asked when he found Joyce standing by the back door, blowing smoke outside, handing the cigarette over to him with a welcoming smile for him to share as he neared.

He drew on the cigarette with a grateful groan, leaning his head against the doorframe. It had been a hell of a day. What was it about the cold weather that made people act like idiots? Two car accidents

and then having to deal with Old Mr. Peterson, which was always aggravating to say the least, when some kids busted the windows in his store.

'Death by gingerbread house,' Joyce told him, laughing as she heard another chorus of groans, 'I found them in there almost an hour ago. I'm pretty sure they ate five of them between them.'

'Jesus,' Hopper chuckled.

El had never had that much sugar in her life. Tonight is going to be interesting, he thought, shaking his head, amused despite himself. She was never going to sleep, would probably be bouncing off the walls until dawn.

They passed the cigarette between, chatting quietly about their days as they listened to the kids slowly stirring to life, grinning at each other as the pained moans began to fill the quiet, moving closer to the living room to watch them.

'I'm never going to eat again', Max whimpered pitifully, rolling onto her side, stomach gurgling dangerously.

'I think I'm going to puke', Lucas groaned, gagging slightly as he rose onto his elbows.

'Me too', Will moaned, from where he had collapsed against the couch, looking slightly green.

'Well don't do it here! If you puke, I'll puke. It'll be a regular puke fest', Dustin said, swallowing back the bile and gingerbread that was seemed to be slowly rising up his throat.

'Stop saying puke!' Mike yelled, rolling on the floor, before stilling as his stomach clenched dangerously at the movement, pressing his face to the floor.

El was awake beside him and seemed to be the only one capable of moving, crawling to her feet, patting a moaning Mike's back sympathetically, before she stumbled her way towards Hopper, giving him a sleepy smile.

She leant against his side heavily, resting her chin on his arm, sighing as he draped an arm around her shoulder, his face softening as he looked down at her.

'Hey E. How are you feeling? I heard you made gingerbread houses today? How it'd go?'

El nodded, her tired eyes brightening as she took his hand and dragged him over to the table where her creation still sat, a sudden shy look on her face as she showed him.

'Mike shared his so I could save mine to show you. Look, it's home. I made the cabin. There's the porch and our chimney...and I even put the logs for the fire outside,' she said, shifting anxiously on her feet as she showed him the different parts, desperately wanting him to like it as much as she did, stomach clenching as she waited with bated breath for him to speak.

Hopper swallowed hard as he stared down at the gingerbread cabin, his sight blurring slightly. The roof was starting to cave in slightly, the porch crooked and it was covered in so much icing sugar Hopper could barely see the brown beneath but to him it was beyond perfect. It was their home.

Home. She had called it home, he realised, throat suddenly thick with unshed tears. She thought of the cabin as home. Maybe he was doing something right after all.

'Wow kid...good work', he said, patting her shoulder clumsily, pressing a soft kiss to her frosting covered head.

Joyce gave him an understanding look, squeezing his shoulder as she passed to stand beside El to take a look herself, eyes widening.

'It's beautiful, sweetheart', she gushed genuinely, laying her hands on her shoulders gently as she looked it over intently.

El beamed at Joyce, her smile so bright it was almost blinding, her cheeks flushed with pride. They liked it. They really really liked it!

Joyce glanced up at Hopper, a sudden sly look in her eyes that made him raise his eyebrows, her lips tilting up mischeviously.

'So do you guys want to stay for dinner? We were thinking of ordering pizzas. A lot of them. You kids like pizza right?' she said, raising her voice so the others could hear her.

Hopper barked out a laugh as he realised what Joyce was doing just as a chorus of groans and curses erupted in the living room.

'Please god no!'

'No more food. Food is evil!'

'Why is your Mom trying to torture us?'

'I don't know', Will whined loudly, making Joyce laugh again, her eyes crinkling.

Hopper didn't realise he was staring at Joyce until he felt El's eyes on him, his cheeks flushing slightly as she cocked her head to the side, eyes squinting as if she was trying to work something out.

Shit, was he blushing? He was a forty-something year old man, for god's sake. And he was Jim Hopper! Jim Hopper didn't blush just for being caught staring at his old friend...even if that friend did make his heart race like a bloody teenagers, a friend he thought about a lot more than he liked to admit.

El's face suddenly relaxed, as if she'd finally figured something out, a slow smile spreading across her face that for some reason made him suddenly nervous, giving her a suspicious look that she ignored, turning to Joyce with a small, perplexed frown that he wasn't sure was real or not.

'What's pizza?'

Joyce's eyes widened, wrapping an arm around El's shoulder as she gave Hopper a scolding look.

'Seriously, Hop? You didn't buy her pizza once last year?. That does it, you guys are definitely staying for dinner tonight,' Joyce said, rushing over to the phone to call in an order, tutting at him in mock-disappointment.

Hopper narrowed his eyes at El as she spun around to walk back into the living room to join her friends, a deceptively innocent look on her face.

The kid was up to something. That much was clear. He knew that look. The look that she usually wore when she wanted something. And she usually got her way.

And he knew in that moment that whatever it was, he was definitely screwed.

**Notes for the Chapter:**

> What did you all think? Let me know!! :D - Katie xoxo

# 4. To face unafraid the plans that we made, walking in a winter wonderland...

**Notes for the Chapter:**

> Hey everyone! OMG, you are all seriously the best! I just loving checking my messages and seeing all your wonderful comments xx Definitely making my holidays :D Anyways, here it is- the new chapter! It's a nice extra long one as well so...I hope you enjoy! xx

'El...El, come on, you have to get up'.

El jolted awake, eyes wide as she lifted her head from the pillow to stare around the room. She blinked when she spotted Hopper hovering over her in the dark, his hands shaking her awake, lips quirked upwards in amusement, and felt her face fold downwards into a scowl, glaring blearily at him.

The sun was even up yet, she thought with a quiet groan, confusion quickly joining the irritation running through her as she glanced at the clock. 5-0-5.

Why was Hopper waking her? Too early...wanna sleep, she thought, trying to keep her eyes open, eyes that felt too heavy and desperately wanted to close, long enough to get an answer to what had brought on this stupidness, because being up before dawn was definitely something Hopper would usually call stupid.

Hopper barely bit back a laugh at the way she was glaring at him, her curly hair sticking up in all directions, face creased with marks from her pillow, eyes dark with irritation and sleepiness. She looked like an angry porcupine, he thought, chuckling as she raised an eyebrow at him, pushing back her curls with a hand that quickly flopped back down onto the mattress, too tired to even hold it up. His face softened at that, guilt filling him at having to wake her.

She'd gone to sleep before her usual bed-time last night, something that he usually had to fight her on, especially if one of those god

awful soaps were on and she just "had" to watch it. But this time he'd barely managed to open the door after dinner at Joyce's before she was pushing past him without a word, walking into her room and flopping down onto the bed, asleep before he'd even managed to come in to tuck her in. She was exhausted from the last few days with her friends, not used to so much excitement and physical activity after her year of being hidden in the cabin.

I really need to do something about getting her more things to do than watch television, he thought, frowning slightly, at a loss. He'd have to ask Joyce for some ideas.

When Hopper didn't speak, just kept sitting there, lost in thought, she huffed out a breath, dropping her head back down to the pillow and using her powers to yank the blankets over her head and hold them there, squeezing her eyes shut again stubbornly.

'Go away', she mumbled, only growing more annoyed when she heard Hopper chuckle again, tugging at the blankets to try and pull them back, but they wouldn't budge no matter how hard he tried, held firmly in place by her powers.

He let go with a sigh, sitting down on the edge of the bed, patting her leg on top of the blanket.

'I know it's early, kid...even by your standards....but I got called in for work and you need to get up.'

The El-sized lump under the blankets didn't even move, showing no sign that she'd heard him and Hopper muttered under his breath, rubbing a hand over his face.

Damn stubborn teenager, he thought, shaking his head as he got to his feet to walk out of the room.

'Well I see you'd rather stay here all day than go to Joyce's and see you're friends. But it's up to you, I guess....'

El's eyes popped open wide as she quickly pushed off her blankets and scrambled out of bed, her feet getting tangled in the sheets, making her fall to the floor where she landed with a loud thump. Ow!

she thought, rubbing her elbow where she'd banged it against the floor, scowling slightly, but she didn't let it stop her, stumbling across the room in the dark to pull out some clothes, still half-asleep.

She was going to see her friends! How could she have forgotten? she wondered, pulling a jumper over the top of her pyjamas, pulling her shoes on, frowning when she'd realised in her sleepy state she'd put them on the wrong feet and quickly fixed it.

She was still so tired, exhaustion beating at her with every slow, sluggish step as she made her way out to Hopper where he waited patiently by the front door, almost tripping into the doorway as she neared him, only missing because Hopper managed to catch her. But there was no way she missing out on seeing her friends because she was tired. She had only had three days left and she was going to make sure she enjoyed every single bit of it.

They climbed into the cruiser in the dark, snow still falling heavily around them to El's growing frustration. How long was it going to keep snowing for? she thought, the very sight of the white lumps making her chest tighten in a way that made it hard to breathe, her heart racing uncontrollably.
She would do anything for the heat of summer, even if it meant being stuck in the cabin, which grew so unbearably hot she was in a constant state of stickiness, her hair frizzing uncontrollably. No, winter was definitely not her favourite.

El shivered, wrapping her arms around her waist, trying to make herself as small as possible, to somehow escape the never-ending snow. She jumped as Hopper grabbed her hand, squeezing it gently, his thin-lipped smile warming his eyes as he glanced down at her, and she knew he understood, leaning her head against his arm.

She fell asleep with her head resting against him, bouncing along with the road on the short drive to the Byer's, her head bobbing in a way that Hopper was sure had to hurt, turning it gently so it was resting more securely between the seat and his shoulder.
Hopper pulled up in front of the house, jumping out of the cab of the truck and walking around to open her door, unbuckling her seat-belt and gently lifted her out, his heart clenching when she just snuggled in closer, feeling secure and safe in his arms, still unbelievably

humbled by her trust in him.

'It's alright, kid, I gotcha', he said, tone gentle as she shifted in the cold, face scrunching up in confusion.

He fumbled slightly as he reached the door, adjusting his hold so he could reach out and knock on the door, almost dropping her in the process.

The door swung open and a surprised Jonathan stood in the doorway, obviously on his way to work, car keys in one hand, jacket in the other.

'Oh. Hey Chief. Hi El,' he said, giving her a tiny smile as he saw her in Hopper's arm.

El opened one eye, giving him a sleepy wave, before closing them again, burrowing her face back in Hopper's chest.

'You're up early' Hopper said, glancing behind him into the strangely quiet house, surprised he was the one to open the door and not Joyce as he'd expected.

'Yeah, the boss asked me to do some extra shifts because of Christmas coming up and we need the extra cash so....' he shrugged, his cheeks darkening in embarrassment at the information he'd just accidentally revealed, averting his eyes.

Hopper knew...hell, everyone knew...that the Byer's often struggled at home, Joyce having to work constantly to pay bills and keep her boys feed and clothed and Jonathan having taken on a job at a young age to help in anyway he could since Lonnie, the asshole, ran out on them. But they always managed, wanting to look after themselves, not wanting sympathy or help. They looked after their own and Hopper could respect that. If anyone else couldn't or had something to say...well, they'd have him to deal with.

'Mom's asleep inside,' Jonathan continued after a minute, shifting awkwardly in the doorway, 'She has the day off but if you want I can go wake her...'

'No, no,' Hopper said quickly, his stomach clenching as he

remembered how tired Joyce had been looking lately, dark circles under her eyes, obviously not sleeping or really eating, always quiet and withdrawn since...since Bob. No, she needed all the rest and peace she could manage to get.

'No, let her sleep. I was just hoping for a favour. I know it's really freaking early but I got called in for an emergency at work and I can't leave El at home by herself. I don't know when I'll be done and she wouldn't have a way to get here. Is it okay if she stays here until everyone else arrives later?'

Jonathan nodded, stepping back to let them into the house.

'Yeah, that's no problem. I'll just leave Mom a note so she knows El's here. If...if she wants to keep sleeping she can crash in my room. I'd put her in with Will but I don't want to wake him.'

Hopper could tell from the worried look Jonathan sent Will's slightly open door as they passed it down the hall that Will was obviously struggling as much as their Mom, and he couldn't blame the kid after the hell he'd been through over the last year. He could understand why Jonathan was concerned, but....Will was strong, something they all now knew. A grown man couldn't have handled what that kid went through and still be able to smile and have fun with his friends and still see the good in the world like he did. Yeah, Will was one tough kid and he was going to get through it all. Hopper would bet money on it.

He gave Jonathan a quick squeeze on the shoulder, showing he understood in the only way he could in that moment, but felt like he helped a little when he got a small smile in return as Jonathan pushed the door to his room open.

Hopper walked in, putting El down on the unmade bed gently, tugging the covers over her as she opened her eyes to stare up at him, frowning slightly as she looked around to see where she was.

'Don't worry, kid, you're just at Joyce's. I gotta head into work. I should be back by our usual time but if I'm going to be late I'll call Joyce and let her know so you don't worry. Okay?'

El nodded and he ruffled her hair with a smile.

'Get some sleep'.

Hopper walked out, patting Jonathan on the back distractedly as he left, glancing down at his watch with a muffled curse. He was already half an hour late. Flo was going to give him such an earful about it, he thought wryly, shaking at his head with a quiet quirk of his lips as he thought of the shock she'd eventually get next year when she finally learnt the truth, when it was finally safe for El to come out of hiding.

Jim Hopper taking in his illegitimate teenage daughter that he hadn't known about, a story both he and the Doc had agreed on when he'd given him the birth certificate. Wasn't the town going to have a field day with that one? He was quietly surprised, as he climbed back into the cab, slipping his keys into the ignition, that he was actually looking forward to it, to finally having the chance to show off his girl to the world.

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El snuggled down into the still slightly warm sheets and blankets that smelt different to hers, but not in a bad way, closing her eyes and slowly beginning to drift off when Jonathan spoke up, voice hesitant and unsure.

'Hey El?'

El lifted her head from the pillow, shocked to find Jonathan shifting in front of the open doorway, his hands in the pockets of his jeans, expression nervous.

She had never really spent much time with Will's quiet older brother...who she knew from Will, who talked about him constantly, took photographs and had the best taste in music, who was always with Mike's older sister, Nancy (a fact that made Mike roll his eyes, pretending to gag whenever he saw them together). El had met him before, of course, before the Demogorgon and when she'd returned, and she knew all about how Nancy, Steve and Jonathan had tried to kill the Demogorgon, but they'd never been alone before. Why would

he want to talk to her?

'I....uh....' he said, faltering slightly under her intense, steady gaze, chewing the inside of his cheek nervously, 'I know we haven't really gotten to talk before but...I've been meaning to...for a while I've wanted to say...to tell you...thank you!'

He finally managed to blurt the word out, the relief of it short-lived as he watched El's frown only growing deeper as she stared at him, her wide brown eyes full of bewilderment, clearly not understanding what he was saying.

El sat up slowly, tilting her head at him, confused.

'Thank you?'

Jonathan blushed slightly, rubbing at his neck awkwardly.

'Uh...yeah. For helping...well...actually for saving Will. Both times. If it hadn't been for you he might not...'

Jonathan couldn't bring himself to finish that sentence, feeling sick and lost at the mere thought of a world where his little brother wasn't here...where he didn't exist anymore. He'd already been through that once before, the paralysing fear, pain and guilt of seeing that tiny body on a slab in the morgue, the fake body that those government assholes had tried to pass off as Will. He knew from those moments of agonising loss that there was no way that he could go through that again. He couldn't survive in a world without him in it.

El's lips tilted up into a sad smile as she saw the pain flitting through Jonathan's dark eyes, shaking her head.

'You don't need to thank me. Will's my friend....you help friends'.

This was one of their most important rules. "Friend's don't lie" was the first. And "you offer assistance to a party member in need" was the second. You always help each other. And El...she knew enough about being afraid...of being lost and so alone. She never wanted anyone to feel that. She would do whatever it took to make sure the people she loved were safe and happy. Always.

Jonathan stared at her for a second, stunned by the sureness in her voice. He opened his mouth to point out the fact that El hadn't even known Will then, when he'd first been taken to the Upside Down, that she didn't even properly meet him until the day after she'd closed the gate and they'd gotten the Mind Flayer out of Will. but he stopped when he saw the stubborn resolve on her face, her jaw firming. And he knew that his logic wouldn't change her mind because it didn't matter to her. It never would.

Will was Mike, Lucas and Dustin's friend which made him hers as well, even before they met. She cared for the people she loved fiercely and selflessly, and fought for them just as ferociously, putting them before even her own safety, as she'd proven with both the Demogorgon and the Mind Flayer, almost draining herself completely the second time. That's just who she was. He could tell that even from only having known her through Will and his friends, especially Mike, who couldn't seem to shut about her, though his friends didn't seem to mind under the merciless teasing. All Jonathan knew was that he could never repay her for what she'd done.

He cleared his throat, giving her a watery smile as he backed away.

'Well...that's all I wanted to say, I guess. Have a good sleep, El', he said, closing the door behind him, leaving it open slightly like he did with Will, sure she would want it open to the light after everything she'd been through.

'Jonathan?' El said, calling out to him quietly, but he immediately popped his head back through the door, expression concerned.

'Yeah? You okay?'

El nodded.

'I...just...could you help me with something?'

Jonathan's frown faded away and he nodded immediately.

'Anything.'

Later, after El had explained her plan, a surprise that she knew only Jonathan could help her with and swore him to secrecy about, she

snuggled back into his pillow, smiling when she heard him flick the hallway light on, the light seeping into the room, chasing away the bad things that she sometimes worried still hid in the dark, waiting to pull her away back into the Upside Down.

Will was lucky to have a big brother like Jonathan, she thought, yawning as she let her eyes drift closed again. Maybe one day....if she was real lucky...she could have one too.

It was her last thought before she finally drifted back off to sleep, exhaustion carrying her away.

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El wandered out of Jonathan's room dazedly a few hours later, rubbing her eyes eyes as she blinked at the pale sunlight pooling in through the windows, surprised to see how late it was. How long had she been sleeping for? Where were Mike and the others? she thought, anxiety slowly trickling into her. What if they'd forgotten to come?

She walked down on the hallway on quiet feet, her pyjamas rustling as she moved, and stopped in the doorway as she found Joyce standing in the kitchen, humming along to the music playing on the radio on the counter, her worry at being alone fading slightly at the sight of her.

'...let your heart be light...next year all our troubles will be out of sight....' Joyce sang along softly, her eyes faraway as she quietly rolled cookie dough on the table.

She jumped as she looked up, her heart jolting as she found El standing in the doorway staring at her, and placed a hand on her suddenly racing heart with a small, sheepish laugh.

'You scared me,' she said, giving her a wide smile as she waved her over, pressing a soft kiss to her head as she neared, 'How'd you sleep, sweetheart?'

'Good', El said, glancing at the clock, stunned to see it was already ten in the morning. She had never slept this late. They had woken her early in the Lab for as long as she could remember, the routine

always the same, so her body was just programmed to wake at that time. She must have been really tired to manage to sleep so long.

She looked curiously over at the living room, surprised to find it completely empty, the house quiet and obviously empty of anyone but the two of them. Joyce followed her gaze and smiled, shaking her head.

'The boys and Max arrived about an hour ago but wanted to let you sleep. They've gone off somewhere to get today's surprise ready.'

'What is it?' El asked, keeping her eye's on Joyce's hands as they rolled the wooden pin over the white dough, her voice carefully casual.

'Nice try,' Joyce said with a laugh, bopping her on the nose with a finger, 'But I'm under strict instructions not to let anything slip. So you'll just have to wait and see.'

El sighed, pushing back her curls with one hand, disappointed and a tiny bit frustrated that Joyce had seen through her casual tone. She really didn't like the waiting...even though from the last couples of days she knew surprises were heaps of fun and worth the wait but...the actual waiting was no fun at all!

Trying to distract herself from her impatient thoughts, El stepped in closer, peering down at the dough on the table curiously.

'What are you doing?'

'I'm baking cookies. Shortbread ones because Jonathan never really liked gingerbread. I used to do it with the boys every year but...you know...they grew out of it', Joyce said, trying to appear nonplussed, but she couldn't help the way her lips tilted downwards, eyes growing sad in a way that made El's eyes widen with concern.

Her boys were growing up, she thought wistfully, heart clenching slightly at the thought. It was the first year that even Will hadn't wanted to bake cookies with her, something they'd been doing since Jonathan was four and Will was still a baby. It was all going by too fast. Jonathan would be going to college after next year and was

spending all his time with Nancy nowadays, and Will would rather spend time with his friends than at home with his Mom, which was all normal and a part of growing up but....she missed having her boys around. She missed doing the things they used when they were little, having movies marathons, baking cookies, decorating the house and game nights.

Will still needed her, especially with everything he had gone through last month and the year before, but he was growing up so fast and getting so independent. He was starting to get annoyed and antsy with her being so overprotective and she knew she had to relax, to step back even though everything inside her panicked at the thought of him being out of sight. She'd almost lost him twice. How could she let him just wander out into the world on his own again? But she had to, she knew that. She had to let him go be a kid like before, to let him ride his bike back home at night, to run around the woods with his friends or go to the arcade on his own. She couldn't keep him locked up safe, no matter how much she wanted to. He was a teenager now, and he'd more than proven he was stronger than she'd ever imagined anyone his age could be.

It....all of it...just made her feel slightly lost and obsolete, as silly as it sounded even in her own head.

El, unaware of Joyce's thoughts, looked at her warily at the mention of cooking, eyeing the warming oven like it was about to explode. Will had warned her that his Mom wasn't the greatest of cooks...which was him being generous, according to Hopper who had chuckled when she'd asked him what Will had meant.

Joyce shook her head, dragging herself from her depressing thoughts, and couldn't help but laugh as she saw the look on El's face, patting her on the shoulder.

'Good to know my horrible cooking skills have gotten around,' she said, tone rueful, blowing back her hair from her face. She felt a pang of guilt when she saw El's face fall slightly, obviously feeling bad about her reaction and gave her a reassuring smile, 'Don't worry, honey, cookies are my one speciality. You'll like them, I promise. Would you like to help me while you wait?'

When El nodded hesitantly, not really knowing what to do, Joyce only smiled and gently took her hand so as not to startle her, and reached for one of the tools on the table.

'Look,' she said, showing her the festive shape of the cookie cutter she had set out earlier, ones she'd bought years ago, and pressed it carefully to the mixture, lifting it up to show El the shape left behind, 'See. These are called cookie cutters and you put them in the mixture to make all sorts of different shapes.'

El leant forward, mouth falling open slightly in fascination as she saw that Santa had suddenly formed out of the mixture, her eyes widening with delight. Santa had popped up many times in the book Hopper had given her, and she knew he was the man who brought little kids gifts, but he wasn't really real, a fact that Lucas had reluctantly revealed only a few days ago, not wanting to ruin it for her, but knowing she would find out eventually.

There were so many different shapes, she thought, holding up each cookie cutter to examine curiously. There was a star and a reindeer like Rudolph, candy-canes and trees and....

'What's this?' she asked, lifting up one for Joyce to see, confused by its strange shape.

'Oh! That's mistletoe, honey. It's a Christmas tradition. You hang it in your doorways and if you get caught standing under it with someone you have to kiss them', she said, her voice trembling slightly, surprised by the sudden tightness in her throat.

She quickly glanced away, not wanting to worry El, pressing her lips together tightly, tears prickling her eyes as she desperately tried not to think of the last man she had kissed. And then lost.

El watched, her stomach clenching painfully, as Joyce's face grew sad, eyes dulling and shoulders slumping forward. She moved in closer until she pressed to her side, trying to offer any comfort she could, her tiny hand slipping into Joyce's.

'I'm sorry about your friend...the one who's gone', El said quietly. Hopper had told her about the man who had died in the Lab saving

them all. And how sad it had made Joyce, who had been very close to him. Like Mike and her. Or Jonathan and Nancy.

El flinched slightly when she felt Joyce go still beside her and saw her hands suddenly begin to tremble, guilt almost choking her.

Oh, no, she'd made her sad. She didn't mean to. She'd just been trying to help.

But Joyce only sniffled before turning, crouching down in front of her, giving a wobbly smile.

'Me too, sweetie. He was....Bob was a good man. I loved him very much', she said, tears filling her eyes as she said his name for the first time in a month.

God, she missed him so much. He'd been the first man she'd let into her life, other than Hopper, since Lonnie left and he'd been completely worth taking the chance on. Kind and good, a bit of a dork but in the most endearing way, and he'd treated her kids like they were his own. She'd only wished she'd fought harder for him to stay that night. But she knew she could never have stopped him. That's just the type of man he was. Utterly selfless.

El's stomach clenched as she saw the tears in Joyce's eyes, her lips trembling in response. She had never gotten to meet Bob, but Mike and Will had told her all about him and how he'd saved them all. He had been their superhero, giving up his life to save them all from the Demodogs when they'd swarmed the labs. Without him, she wouldn't have her friends. She wished she could have saved him too...that she could somehow make it better.

'Are you still sad?' she asked, voice quiet, scuffing the floor with her socked foot.

Joyce nodded, brushing back one of her curls with gentle hands.

'I am, sweetheart. I probably will be for a long time but that's normal. Being sad...it just shows that...that the person who is gone...that they were important to you. It's a way of remembering how much you loved them and will miss them.'

'Like Mama. I'm get sad about Mama sometimes'.

Joyce blinked in surprise, not knowing what to say. Hopper hadn't told her that El had met her Mama, poor Terry Ives whose loss of her daughter, stolen from her by Brenner at birth all those years ago, had completely destroyed her life. When could she possibly have seen her? Joyce couldn't help but wish she hadn't, that she remained ignorant of the horrible truth of it all. El's life had been full of too much horror and pain already, things she should never have had to go through. To learn that she had lost her Mama before she even had the chance to find her, to know her, and knowing she wouldn't ever get her back...it wasn't fair. Joyce just wanted to bundle her up like Will, to protect her from it all, and it killed her that she couldn't. Because she'd already been through it all, so many losses that no-one could ever fix. Not completely. But god, she knew she would do whatever it took to make sure the rest of her life was better. No, not just better. Extraordinary.

'Yes, sweetheart. Like your Mama', she said softly, caressing her head.

El swallowed hard as she thought of her Mama, just sitting in that chair day after day, lost in her own mind, stuck reliving the worst moments of her life over and over, and how she would never be able to come back. Her chin wobbled slightly, seeing the understanding and sympathy in Joyce's face, the shared losses, and did what she'd always wanted someone to do for her when she was sad or afraid, caged in the cold, dark rooms of the Lab.

She threw herself into Joyce's arm, wrapping her arms around her waist and hugged her as tight as she could as a few tears trickled down her cheeks. The painful tightness in her chest eased slightly when she felt Joyce's arms hug her back just as tightly, the loving, comforting hug of a mother that El needed, that she had so desperately craved, all those years in the Lab.
Joyce's breath shuddered out as she pressed a kiss to El's head, letting a few tears of her own fall.

Maybe I do have someone who still needs me after all, she thought, wiping at her cheeks before pulling back, her hands on El's shoulders.

'No more tears', she said, wiping at El's wet cheeks with a small smile,

'Today is supposed to be fun so that's exactly what we're going to do. And we have cookies to make before those friends of yours and my son come home and try to demolish them all. I swear they're eating machines lately.'

El giggled, sniffling slightly as Joyce walked over and turned the radio up, an unfamiliar but happy tune quickly filling the kitchen.

'Rockin' around the Christmas tree, at the Christmas party hop', Joyce sang along, grabbing El's hand and giving her a spin that had El giggling breathlessly.

They danced around the kitchen, jumping all over the place as Joyce used the rolling pin as a microphone. El was a bit more reserved, only swaying along to the music, letting Joyce twirl her and take the lead, but she couldn't hide the bright, happy smile that creased her cheeks as she hummed quietly along with the music when she worked out the tune, both of them just having fun.

This is what the holidays should be, Joyce decided as she watched El bop along to the music, cutting out cookies eagerly, lifting them carefully and placing them on the pan to go into the oven. Exciting, full of joy and magic and fun, something that El was seriously lacking in. Well, she'd just have to do something about that, wouldn't she? Even if she had to beat Hopper into submission to get him to agree to her plan.

Joyce grinned at the thought, a laugh bubbling up in her chest. She had to admit, she kind of liked the idea of that.

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One hour and four batches of cookies later the boys and Max burst into the house, voices loud and excited, speaking over one another. El laughed when she saw them, all looking funny and puffy in their different coloured snow jackets just like the one she had borrowed from Joyce, along with a pair of Will's jeans, a beanie that belonged to Jonathan and a pair of gloves tucked into her jeans. Their cheeks were all flushed from the cold and hair wet and sticking to their foreheads, flecked with quickly melting snow.

'Look who's finally up!' Dustin crowed, grinning at El as he walked into the kitchen, eyes widening as he saw the rows of still warm cookies cooling on the table, eagerly scooping one up.

'El!' Max said, rushing over to hug her. El hugged her back, surprised by the show of affection, something she knew Max didn't do often. But she quickly realised what she was doing when she saw Max smirk, winking as she glanced over at Mike where he stood, dark eyes narrowed suspiciously, leg jiggling as he waited impatiently for his turn to greet her.

El gave Max a look that clearly said 'stop it', making her give a heavy put-upon sigh and pull back, as if she hadn't just been messing with him.

'Oh fine. Here you go, lover-boy. No need to hog her, jeez, Wheeler.'

Mike only glared at her, his face softening when he turned to El, reaching out to take her hand with his gloved one.

'Mike', El said, her face lighting up as she gave him a hug, closing her eyes as his arms came around her.

'Hey El. Are you excited for today?' he asked, pulling back, his dark eyes squinting as he took in her slightly red eyes and nose. Had El been crying? What had happened?

'You okay?'

El nodded, not really wanting to have to explain everything that had gone on between Joyce and her earlier, squeezing his fingers reassuringly.

'Okay.'

'Hey kids,' Joyce said, coming back in from outside where she'd been sneaking a smoke, smiling at them, 'Everything all set?'

'Yeah, everything's all ready, Mom', Will said, sharing a secretive smile with the others that almost had El pouting.

'What's ready?' she asked, crossing her arms over her chest.

Lucas exchanged a look with Mike, both of them nodding in agreement, before he turned to El, grinning.

'Sledding! We're going to take you sledding. It's where you go down a hill on this...well, it's like a flat bit of wood that curves upwards and you sit on it and slide down the snow. It's really fun.'

El's heart slammed painfully hard against her ribs, throat tightening so quickly she suddenly found it hard to breath at the word "snow" but she forced a smile, seeing the excitement on all her friend's face, not wanting to ruin their plans or fun.

She quickly slipped her fingers into her gloves, barely able to hide their shaking from sight, before grabbing Mike's hand tightly as they made their way out into the snow, giving Joyce a quick wave goodbye.

'I can't wait! I've been looking forward to this one since we wrote out the plan', Will said, bouncing along at their sides as they walked down the porch and into the snow.

'We even found the perfect hill, El. It's in the woods, completely out of sight of the house and any roads so no-one will see us,' Lucas told her, lifting one hand to point at the hill off in the distance, barely visible behind the thick line of trees.

'And it's so freaking high! We're going to be able to go so fast', Dustin said eagerly, high-fiving Will while Max just shook her head, laughing at their antics.

El's breath quickened as she stepped down into the snow, her stomach clenching so hard she felt bile rise into her throat, almost vomiting on the spot as she felt the cold, wetness of the snow seep into her pants, goosebumps rising on her flesh.

Her ears began to ring, muscles locking together as her breath began to come in sharp, unnatural gasps, and she froze in place, pulling Mike to a stop along with her. She couldn't breathe, panic rising inside her, choking her until she could only stand there shaking, eyes wide in her pale face.

Memories of the winter before rushed into her mind and all she could feel was the echo of her shivering body curving into the hollow of a tree to try and keep warm....the icy wind biting at her flesh, burrowing into her bones until she couldn't feel her toes and fingers....hunger gnawing at her stomach as she grew weaker and thinner, her beloved pink dress growing dirtier, more ragged and looser with every day, as she slowly starved...she was alone...so alone....trapped with no-where to go....and no-one to save her...

El tried to push the memories back, her chest heaving, lungs screaming for air but she couldn't seem to remember how to breath properly, spots dancing in front of her eyes. Hot scalding tears ran down her cheeks as she wrapped her arms around her waist, rocking back and forth on the spot.

Mike spun around as El's hand left his, his questioning look quickly turning to one of terror as he saw the look on her face and the way she was gasping for breath, her entire body stiff and froze, shaking so hard she looked like she was vibrating, eyes wide and full of fear. A bit of snow landed on her cheek and she flinched, her entire body stiffening further as her shoulders rose towards her ears.

'No....bad....' she managed to gasp out, tears filling her eyes as she stood a stumbling step back, trying to escape the snow. But it was everywhere. She couldn't get away. There was no way out

'El, what's going on? Are you okay?' Will asked, worry shaking his voice as they all turned around to see what the hold up was, blanching at what they found.

The snow! Mike realised with dawning horror, his heart began to race in his chest, his whole body feeling like ice, shock and guilt tightening his chest as he sees the very real fear darkening her eyes. He'd forgotten about the snow....the snow that she had spent a whole three months trying to survive in...the snow she was completely terrified of.

He rushed towards her, his gloved hands cupping her cheeks in his hands, panic running through him at how white her face had gotten, rivalling the snow around them.

'It's okay, El, it's going to be okay. Just look at me, not the snow. Look at me,' El turned wide, panicked eyes to his dark ones, her shaking hands reaching up to clutch at his so tightly his knuckles ground together painfully.

But Mike didn't care, pressing his forehead to hers, keeping his eyes on hers, giving her something to focus on.

'Just follow my breathing okay? In and out,' he said, demonstrating, taking a deep breath and then letting it out, though his breathing was slightly ragged as well, mind racing frantically as he tried to figure out a way to help her.

El desperately tried to focus on Mike's voice, barely able to hear him, the sound muffled over her own frantic heartbeat in her ears, as it slammed almost wildly against her ribs. She forced herself to copy his breathing, her hands squeezing on his as she closed her eyes, the tightness in her chest easing slightly as her panicked gasps slowly began to even out, drawing much needed air into her lungs.

She sagged against him, her face crumpling as hot tears filled her eyes, burying her face in his shoulder to hide it from the others, as well as to avoid looking at the snow, knowing it would set her off again.

Mike's arm tightened around her as he felt her relax against him, guilt almost choking as he pulled her shivering body as close to his as possible, relief leaving him weak and exhausted.

'I'm so sorry, El,' he whispered, running his hand over her curls, chin wobbling as a silent sob wracked his body, 'I forgot about the snow. I should have...this was a stupid idea....I'm so sorry.'

El shook her head, lifting her head to look up at him, swallowing past a throat that felt tight and swollen, her heart aching as she saw how scared he was for her. He was so pale he looked slightly grey, freckles dark flecks against it, eyes wide as he stared at her.

'No. Good idea...I'm alright', she said, weakly, giving him a trembling smile as she wiped at one of the tears that had fallen from his eye.

I'm okay...I'm safe...I'm with my friends, she told herself, pressing her head back to his shoulder, squeezing her eyes shut to hold back the tears that wanted to fall. Everything was okay. She knew they'd never let anything happen to her.

Mike pressed his lips to her forehead, her skin icy cold against his, and let out a shuddering breath.

'Are you sure?'

El smiled despite the sliver of fear still vibrating through her, remembering when he'd first asked her that question, and saw him jolt slightly in surprise, lip moving up into her favourite crooked smile, though it wobbled slightly with emotion, and she knew he was remembering as well. So she gave him the same answer as before, the answer as true now as it was then. Because she was alright. She was with Mike.

'Promise'.

'Shit, El', Max breathed, lips trembling as she clutched Lucas's arm, staring at her friend in shock. She had never seen her like this before, never seen the fear and the panic attacks, never seen the very real nightmares that plagued her, that she lived with everyday. Something like snow wasn't magical and full of wonder for El like it was for her. It was something she had had to fight to stay alive in. It was something to fear, not to enjoy. And it broke Max's heart.

'We're sorry, El', Will said, looking pale, throat bobbing as he swallowed, 'We weren't thinking.'

Dustin nodded as they all walked over to them, reaching out to squeeze her arm gently. El sniffled, smiling tremulously back at him, slightly embarrassed by the way she had reacted. She jumped when Lucas suddenly walked over to her and threw his arms around her neck, hugging her tightly.

Lucas sniffled, tightening his arms around her as he felt El soften slightly, patting his head in a hesistant, confused way that told him he'd shocked her. It was a feeling they shared because he'd shocked himself as well.

He was the first to admit that he hadn't been exactly kind to El when they'd first met, suspicious of her and angry at finding her instead of Will in the woods like they'd planned. He'd thought she was just another problem they had to fix. But then he'd gotten to know her, had learnt the truth of what they had been done to her, how she'd been kept locked up her entire life by those assholes in Hawkins's labs, experimented on and used as nothing more than a lab rat, and she'd become his friend. And then she'd killed the Demogorgon....and died along with it to save them.

That's what they'd convinced themselves of anyways. Dustin and him. They had told themselves she was gone, that it was all over, even though, deep inside, they'd all known that wasn't true. So they hadn't looked for her...he hadn't looked for her...not like Mike had, calling her every night on the Supercom, not telling them, he knew now, because he was sure they would tell him she was gone and he would lose the tiny bit of hope he'd managed to hold onto for so long.

Lucas had felt sick with guilt ever since she'd walked through the door at the Byer's, saving their lives once again, putting herself at risk, when they hadn't even tried to find her. And then to learn what she'd been through, having to run again to keep them and herself safe from the Bad Men...having no choice but to stay in the woods, lost and afraid and cold...

It was all the Bad Men's fault, he thought, face hardening, fingers curling into fists at her back. Mike had told him what El had gone through, having called Hopper at the station to get the details from him, knowing El would never tell them everything, not wanting to hurt them. And it had almost killed Mike, the agony of the truth stabbing deep until he had to share it with someone, to help him live with what the girl he loved- and they all knew he did- had gone through for them. Weeks of paralysing fear and hunger, alone and struggling to survive, having to scavenge for food until she was finally forced to eat squirrel just so she didn't starve. He didn't know how she'd done it, how she was still here and able to smile and laugh them, how she didn't hate the entire world after what she'd been through.

If he ever got his hands on those government assholes, Lucas thought, his face crumpling slightly as he remembered the way El had held

onto Mike, as if he was the only thing keeping her from completely falling apart, he would make them pay. He didn't know how, but he would. It was his silent promise to her.

'I'm okay, Lucas,' El said, patting his back awkwardly as she gave Mike a wide-eyed look, stunned by the worry that had darkened Lucas's eyes just before he'd hugged her, feeling him sob against her shoulder. Out of the entire group, Lucas was the one least likely to hug or show affection, which was why it'd shocked her so much that he would be the first, after Mike, to try and comfort her.

She had gone such a long time without anyone caring for her, treating her as nothing but a pawn to use and abuse, that it still stunned her to realise she had a whole group of friends who loved her. Who would do anything for her....just as she would for them.

Mike smiled at her softly, understanding, his hand reaching down for hers and squeezing gently and she smiled back, her lips trembling as she hugged Lucas with her other arm, closing her eyes.

This was who they were, she realised, her closed eyes filling with fresh tears. The way they had and would always be. If anyone in the party was in trouble they did whatever it took to make it alright again, facing whatever obstacle or villain, human or otherwise, that stood in their way. Just as they'd done many times for her, standing up to the Bad Men, going to distract the Demodogs to give her a chance to close the gate...They fought for each other, no matter what.

She truly didn't understand what she'd done to deserve such incredible, loyal, brave and selfless friends....or what forces had allowed her to stumble out of the rain that rainy November night last year and be found by them, but she would forever be thankful. They were truly the best friends anyone could ever ask for.

'Do you want to go back?' Dustin asked as Lucas abruptly pulled back, wiping at his damp cheeks with a sheepish grin, both of them flushing but smiling at each other, knowing without speaking what the other was feeling. And understanding.

'If you want to go back that's cool, El. We'll just find something else to do that's just as fun', Mike reassured her, squeezing her fingers

gently as everyone else nodded as well to show they wouldn't be mad. It was her choice.

Shame bubbled up inside El as their words, so kind and understanding, settling hot and thick in her stomach, and she ducked her head as hot tears burned at the back of her eyes, unable to look them in the eyes.

'I'm sorry.'

Mike ducking his head to look into her downturned eyes, frowning.

'What are you sorry for?'

'I was afraid...I ruined everything...' she mumbled, lips trembling as she blinked back her tears.

Mike shook his head almost violently at her words, lifting her chin gently so she'd look at him, keeping his face soft, even as anger roared through him. He could kill the Bad Men for making her feel this way- like there was something wrong with her for being afraid. It wasn't her fault, none of it.

'Don't be sorry, El. Everyone's afraid of something. Like I hate clowns- they're so creepy and always smiling,' he shuddered at the thought, making El give a startled laugh that made warmth spread through his chest, happy to make her feel even a slightly bit better.

'I'm scared of beetles', Lucas admitted, as everyone turned to stare at him, gaping, 'What? They're so tiny and get into anything. You know they can climb into your ears and into your brain right?'

El's eyes widened and she turned to Mike, horrified, and he shook his head quickly.

'He's joking', he said, glaring at Lucas, shaking his head. Seriously? We're trying to make her feel better not freak her out more, he thought, and Lucas pulled a face, giving a sheepish, apologetic look.

'I hate Sharks', Dustin said, grinning at El in solidarity as she timidly smiled back, 'Ever since I saw Jaws I get freaked out even going swimming in the lake.'

'The dark', Will said quietly, looking down at the ground, scuffing his foot in the snow.

They all knew Will's reasons for hating the dark now, after almost a week in the cold, barren Upside Down that was so dark you could barely see two feet in front of you, not knowing what monsters were lurking around you, ready to pounce, anyone would be. Mike had secretly snuck him an old night-light of Holly's to help him sleep when he'd first come back, a fact that they had both kept between themselves. They knew the others would never tease Will for it, but it was still found something he felt insecure and embarrassed about. Babies needed night-lights, not teenagers. It was definitely information he wanted to keep to himself.

Dustin squeezed his shoulder as Max took a deep breath, playing with the ends of her hair distractedly to avoid looking at them as she admitted her own fears, cheeks flushed with embarrassment.

'I'm....I'm scared you guys will change your mind about me being in the group. And I'll end up all alone again.'

'Pfft! Not going to happen, Max! You're our zoomer. You're one of us now. Joining the party is...like a lifetime membership. Once you're in you can never leave', Dustin said, lowering his voice for the last sentence dramatically as he slung his arm around her shoulder, giving her a comforting squeeze.

Max snorted, shoving him away with a quick laugh, the feeling of being truly accepted and wanted around by her friends, something she hadn't experienced much of in California and definitely not at home lately, leaving her feeling all warm and fuzzy inside. Not that she'd ever admit it though.

El stared at them all for a long minute, seeing how open and honest their faces were, smiling at her, and could she tell they were telling the truth. She relaxed, giving a small smile back as the nauseating churning in her stomach faded slightly.

'See El, everyone is scared of something. So if you want to go back, no-one is going to be mad. We swear,' Mike told her and the others nodded, waiting patiently for her to decide.

They were all surprised when El quickly shook her head, biting her lip nervously, but her eyes were blazing and determined.

'Are you sure, El? We really don't mind,' Will said, his forehead furrowing with worry, not wanting her to break down again.

El nodded, letting go off her lip as she took a deep breath, straightening her shoulders.

She could go back. She knew that none of them would ever hold it against her, that they would understand completely if she wanted to go back into the warm house and eat cookies, to get away from the horrible snow, but....she didn't want to, the fact stunning her. She didn't want to miss out on going sledding just because she was afraid. She'd been afraid before, when she'd faced the Demogorgon, afraid last month of going back into the lab which had been her prison for twelve long years...but she'd done it. She'd been brave then...and she could be brave now. She knew she could. She wanted to experience all the things she had missed out on growing up, she wanted to have fun with her friends and sledding...sledding did sound like fun. And most of all...she didn't want to let them win. To let the Bad Men take one more thing from her.

She could do this, she thought, determination rising inside her as she took a hesitant step forward and then another. She wasn't going back because of her fear. Not ever again.

El lifted her chin and, without showing any fear, began to stomp her way up to the hill Lucas had pointed out earlier, heart racing against her ribs, but she kept going, resolve unwavering. She was going sledding with friends and nothing, not even her own fear of the snow, was going to stop her.

The others exchanged looks, relief and pride on all their faces as they scrambled after her, trying to keep her distracted by making plans for who would go with who, having only three sleds to share between them.

El's eyes widened as they came to the very top of the hill, her hands shaking slightly as she saw how very high they were up, as everyone set up their sleds on the very edge of the top, nerves stirring to life

again.

'Who's first?' Dustin asked, glancing around at the group, laughing when Max was quick to shake her head, looking slightly nervous. They had almost forgotten it was Max's first time sledding as well.

'Uh-uh. I'll let the professionals go first.'

'It's okay, Max. It's not as scary as it looks,' Lucas said, smiling reassuringly as he wrapped an arm around her shoulders, looking ecstatic as Max leant against him, Will giving him a thumbs up behind her back with a laugh.

'You want to go first, El? We don't have to....we can wait till you're ready...' Mike trailed off as El quickly nodded, knowing if she didn't go soon she'd definitely lose her nerve.

Mike only nodded, taking her hand gently, squeezing it comfortingly when he felt her shake slightly, giving her a smile as he sat down on the front of the sled, grabbing onto the front to hold it steady.

'Climb on the back and....uh....wrap you're arms around my waist', he said, blushing slightly as Dustin whistled teasingly and Lucas made kissy noises, turning around to give them a dirty look.

El climbed on cautiously, sliding her legs around his and wrapped her arms so tightly around his waist that he coughed as the breath was abruptly squeezed out of him. El immediately loosened her grip, horrified, but he just smiled, patting her hand where it lay against him.

'Are you okay? Ready to go?'

No...El thought, but nodded anyway, pressing her chin to his shoulder, holding her breath.

'One.....two....three....' Mike counted down, before shoving his legs in the snow, pushing them forward and suddenly...they were flying!

Her heart jumped as they all but flew down the hill, her arms tightening around Mike's waist, fingers digging into his jacket as the wind rushed past their faces, moving so fast everything around them

was a complete blur.

A smile burst across her face, exhilaration rushing through her veins as she let out a cry of joy, Mike's own laughter echoing in her ears as they landed all too soon at the bottom of the hill, snow spraying all around them.

Mike turning around to look at her, grinning at the way she was bouncing excitedly on the sled, cheeks flushed.

'Good, huh?' he said, brushing a bit of snow from her hair.

El nodded, her smile so big her cheeks ached, almost vibrating with excitement.

They were right...sledding was fun!

Mike laughed, and El couldn't help the way her heart skipped a beat at how pretty he looked like that...hair covered in flecks of white snow, cheeks red and dark eyes bright with fun. Before she even thought about it she was leaning forward to press her lips to his, giving him a quick kiss that had both their hearts racing, warm all over despite the cold around them.

She pulled back after a few seconds, blushing as their friends whooped and teased them playfully from the top of the hill.

'Can we go again? Please please please?' El said, eyes wide and begging.

Mike nodded slowly, dazed as he opened his eyes to met hers, head spinning dizzily in reaction to the kiss, his lips still slightly puckered in surprise.

El grinned at him, pressing another quick kiss to his mouth before she scrambled to her feet, grabbing the sled and beginning to drag it back up the hill.

'Come on, Mike!' she called back, smiling at him over her shoulder, smile bright and ecstatic.

Mike shook his head, bringing himself back into focus, blushing as he

realised he'd just been staring after her, rising on suddenly unsteady feet. He grinned goofily, before racing after her, slipping his hand around hers to help her carry the sled, cheeks flushing as she beamed back at him.

They go again and again, spending hours taking turns on the sleds, racing each other down the hill. Max's scream as Lucas and her had careened down the hill for the first time, grabbing Lucas so hard he'd almost crashed, had made everyone burst into a fit of laughter, teasing her all day until she threatened to run them all over with Billy's car, making them gulp nervously.

El was exhausted by the end of the day, lying in the snow, her fear completely forgotten as she saw how fun snow could be, how it was supposed to be, beside Max, watching as they boys ran around throwing snowballs at each other, their laughter so loud and happy she couldn't but smile, glad that they were all having fun for once. Especially Mike.

He'd been so sad and quiet every time she'd visited him in the void, only growing less hopeful with every call to her, every time she didn't, couldn't, reply, and it had almost broken her to see him like that. He felt everything so strongly and took on so much that should never be placed on his shoulders. He blamed himself for so many things he couldn't control and weren't his fault, the guilt and pain El knew he carried for not being able to save her last year, and for not realising Will was in trouble until it was almost too late, almost consuming him at times. To see him happy now...just playing in the snow with their friends, laughing and finally being able to be kids together for once...it was everything to her.

'How are they doing it?' Max groaned, moving her arms and legs up and down in the snow, shaking her head at them, 'I feel like I could sleep for a week, I'm so tired. How are they still running around?'

El shrugged, frowning at Max distractedly, trying to work out what she was doing.

Max saw her staring and grinned.

'Oh...it's a snow angel! I never got to make one in California so I

thought I'd give it a try. See, you just move your arm and legs like this and when you stand up it looks like an angel.'

'An angel?' El asked, eyebrows drawing together even as she copied Max's movements, curious about what an angel looked like.

Max's eyes widened and she frowned, trying to work out how to explain it. Jeez, how was Mike so good at this?

'They're like...like a good person who died but still watches over us...that keep us safe. They have wings and are really pretty...'

El nodded after a minute, satisfied with the answer, and Max let out a sigh of relief as they both stood up, staring down at the shapes they'd made. El cocked her head to the side, looking sceptical, even Max grinned, pleased with her efforts, before turning to El suddenly, her eyes wide.

'Hey, did the guys tell you about this whole Secret Santa thing they're doing?'

When El shook her head, Max rolled her eyes, sending the boys a exasperated look.

'God, they're hopeless. Secret Santa is like you pick a name out of a hat or something and whoever's name you get you have to buy them a present for Christmas. So...here', Max said, reaching into the pocket of her puffy blue jacket, handing El a tiny slip of paper.

El took it and began to open it, face curious.

'You got Dustin', Max said, cheerfully as she sat back down, shrugging when El raised her eyebrows at her, 'What? I looked. Sue me.'

El looked at the paper for a long moment before tucking it into her jeans with a small frown. What was she going to get Dustin for Christmas? She knew he liked comic books and movies like the others, and he was weirdly obsessed with hairspray lately, but he already had tons of those. She wanted to get him something different...something that would really make him happy...

Her eyes lit up as an idea suddenly popped into her head, and

inwardly gave a little dance. That was it! It was....the best...something she knew he would love more than anything else. Now she just had to figure out a way to convince Hopper to help her get it....

They made their way back to the Byer's not long after, walking slowly, everyone exhausted, chatting cheerfully about their day as the sun began to set behind them, already making plans to do it again sometime after Christmas.

El walked beside Mike, leaning her head against his shoulder as she let out a quiet yawn, definitely ready for dinner and bed.
Mike gave her an soft look, wrapping an arm around her shoulder.

'So what did you think?'

El glanced up at him, insides melting at the look on his face, and leant up to kiss his sharp chin.

'Snow's....pretty good. Can we do something else with snow?'

Mike put on a mock-thoughtful look, biting back a grin as El looked up at him impatiently, crossing her arms over her chest.

'I don't know...we'll just have to wait and see huh?'

El groaned in frustration, making Mike laugh as they walked into the house, grinning smugly as he thought of tomorrow's activity and how much he already knew she was going to love it.

**Notes for the Chapter:**

> As always leave me a comment or review! I love hearing from you all- Katie xoxo

# 5. Ice Skating

**Notes for the Chapter:**

> Hey everyone!! Um...could you all get anymore wonderful? Seriously, all the comments and reviews are amazing and I love you all so much for them xx Here it is, the next chapter! Sorry I'm posting so late, I went to see Star Wars and was out all day...and my mind has literally been blown so...there was that as well haha. Anyways, I hope you love it just as much as the rest. :)

It was so...breathtaking....and white, El thought as she stared out over the frozen pond, eyes wide as she took it all in.
Snow blanketed everything, leaving the world feeling muffled and quiet around them, truly peaceful in a way it had rarely been over the last year. Pale sunlight shone through the bare branches of the trees, making the icicles that hung from them twinkle and shine like the lights that hung from her tree at home, snow practically glowing beneath it.

Lucas, Max, Dustin and Mike were already on the ice, alternating between wobbling and gliding across the smooth surface, doing what they had excitedly explained to her was called ice-skating. The pond was small, barely big enough for all of them to fit on it at the same time but somehow they made it work, skating around each other happily.

Will was the only one left on the snowy bank, waiting patiently while El tied the skates Mike had brought for her, an old pair of Nancy's that no longer fit. He had volunteered to help El learn how to skate after Mike had reluctantly admitted he wasn't the best at ice-skating, something El had realised was what Hopper would call "a fucking understatement", since he'd already fallen over five times since he stepped out onto the ice less than ten minutes ago.

'We used to go skating here every year as kids,' Will told her as they both watched their friend's sliding across the ice, grinning as he watched Dustin shuffling along, arms waving all over the place,

before his eyes darted to Mike and he burst out laughing at what he found, 'Mike clearly never got the hang of it.'

El glanced over, biting her lip anxiously as she watched Mike lose his footing again, sprawling in a heap on the cold surface and just lay there, squeezing his eyes shut with a groan as their friend's laughed. She inched forward, her heart speeding up slightly as he didn't get up. Was he okay? What if he had hurt himself?

'You look like Bambi,' Dustin cackled, clearly unconcerned, leaning on his knees as he gasped for breath.

Mike lifted his head from the ice, giving Dustin a dark glare that had him quickly holding up his hands in surrender, skating away warily. Mike barely choked back a frustrated growl, shoving himself up with a hard push, slipping all over the place until he finally managed to regain his footing.

Lucas couldn't help the laugh that slipped out at the sight, quickly sobering when Max elbowed him hard in the ribs, raising her eyebrows at him, before jerking her head towards Mike. Lucas frowned, rubbing his sore ribs with a grumble, before he followed her gaze and noticed for the first time the actual embarrassment on Mike's face, lips pulled down into grimace, staring down at his feet, trying not to meet El's eyes as she watched him worriedly, craning her head to try to catch his gaze, and felt guilt rise inside him as he saw what was happening.

Mike was always so used to being able to show El how to do things, to teach her about the world, that Lucas could tell that he was worried about looking like an idiot in front of her. He totally got it. He always felt like a stuttering, fumbling moron in front of Max. It wasn't a nice feeling.

Lucas gave Max a nod, showing he understood. She only smiled, spinning around to skate over to Dustin as Lucas made his way over to Mike. He patted him on the shoulder sympathetically, giving him a small smile, before grabbing his arm carefully so as not to jostle him and possibly knock him over again.

'Don't worry, Mike. El is going to still love you even if you can't

skate,' he teased, grinning as Mike went even redder, shoving him slightly with a quiet laugh.

'Shut up,' he mumbled, though couldn't help the smile that crept across his face as he shot him a grateful look.

He didn't think he could have handled the utter mortification of falling on his face in front of El again. There was only so much embarrassment a boy could take in front of his....his crush...no, that wasn't big enough to describe his feelings for El. No she wasn't his crush...she was his...his girl. Yeah, he thought, grinning widely as they passed her, giving her a small, reassuring smile that instantly calmed the worry in her wide, brown eyes, smiling back at him. She was his girl!

'Dustin's right. Mike does look like Bambi,' El whispered to Will as Mike and Lucas skated out of ear-shot.

Will's eyes widened, his head snapping to hers as a startled laugh slipped out of him. How did she even know that? When had she watched Bambi?

'What?' he asked, stunned.

'Bambi couldn't walk on the ice either. Hopper said it cause he had long legs and arms and it made him clumsy. Mike is like Bambi', she said, matter-of-factly, finishing tightening her skates and rising to her feet, glancing down at them dubiously as she wobbled atop the metal skates. How did anyone walk in these? she thought, waddling towards Will in a way that made her look like a penguin.

Will pressed his lips together hard to keep from bursting out laughing as the vision of the big, grumpy Hopper watching Disney films with El flashed through his mind. Oh, his Mom was going to love hearing about that, he thought, gleefully.

He shook his head, quickly turning his attention back to El as she reached him, giving her an encouraging smile.

'Are you ready?'

El nodded, giving a small, slightly nervous smile as she slowly lifted

her foot to place it on the ice to test how solid it was, not trusting it at all. And for good reason.

Her throat tightened, heart jumping into her throat as her feet slid across the slippery surface, legs slipping out from under her as they moved in completely different directions. She landed on the ice with a muffled thump, dull pain vibrating up her spine.

'Ow,' she said, more in surprise than pain, staring up at Will with wide, stunned eyes, mouth hanging open slightly.

'El, are you okay?' Mike yelled from across the pond, his voice full of panic and concern.

El lifted her head, blinking, slightly dazed by her abrupt drop to the ground, and nodded. Mike's tight shoulders immediately relaxed, smiling at her in relief as he clung to Lucas's shoulder who continued to help him around the small pond.

She lifted her head back up to look at Will, frowning, her lips pursing in confusion before she glanced down at the ice beneath her.

'I fell', she said, voice shocked.

Will laughed.

'Yeah, that happens sometimes. Don't worry, it can be pretty slippery. Here,' he said, holding out his hand and pulling her up carefully, giggling slightly as El rubbed at her bruised butt with an annoyed sigh.

'Okay so...' Will began to explain as he slowly tugged her out onto the ice, El eyeing it suspiciously now she knew what it could do, 'move your feet so that your toes are pointed slightly inward...Yeah that's right. Now move like you're trying to walk but more like sliding...as if you're wearing socks on wood floors.'

El slowly inched her toes in till they formed a V, her eyebrows drawing together in concentration. Her hands tightened on Will's so hard it had to have hurt but Will didn't even flinch, squeezing her hands back encouragingly as they skated along, not getting frustrated once, even as they moved at the slowest pace imaginable.

He grinned when El managed to move a few feet without getting her feet tangled together, taking her around the small pond once and twice, clapping as they finished their third lap.

'You're doing really good, El!'

El smiled back, tilting her head as she looked at Will, at how happy and carefree he looked for once, something she knew that he hadn't felt for a long time. She could tell this Christmas Plan their friends had put together was helping him just as much as it was her, even if it he couldn't see it himself. He no longer looked as haunted, eyes bright rather than dull with painful memories that she knew plagued him awake or asleep, just like they did her, and it made her happy to see him like this.

She was truly glad to have Will as her friend now, just like Dustin, Lucas, Mike (though he was definitely more than just a friend), and Max. Though she hadn't known Will as long as the others, they had gotten very close during the last few weeks. He was quieter than the rest of their friends, happy to just go along with whatever adventure or plan was going on, but was incredibly kind and patient, just like Mike. Despite their short friendship, Will had gone out of his way to be there for her, making her laugh, teaching her how to draw when Hopper would let her go to the Byer's for the day instead of staying in the cabin, and letting her play with his dog. They had a connection that they would never share with the others, even El with Mike. They'd both experienced the horrors of the cold, empty Upside Down, had faced monsters that had almost killed them both, and their lives had almost been destroyed because of the actions of the Bad Men. They understood how the other felt, the shared nightmares and fears, the panic attacks and the constant worry that something would come for them, that they weren't truly free of it all. And El was so glad for that connection, that she had Will as a friend and they could help each other to get past it all, that they were able to talk about it together without worrying their friend's and families.

And she could tell, when Will turned to meet her gaze curiously, his eyes widening as if he was reading her mind (and El sometimes wondered if he could), before growing soft and slightly sad, lips quirking up into a small knowing smile, that he understood. And that he appreciated it just as much as her.

'Now...' Will said, coming to a careful halt in the middle of the lake as their friend's skated around them, deliberately not mentioning their silent conversation, 'do you want to try it without holding my hands?'

El thought about it for a second before she nodded slowly, letting go of Will's hands almost reluctantly. Her heart jumped nervously as Will's hand left hers, arms flailing for a second before she took a deep breath and slowly began to inch forward.

She almost fell straight onto her face, her feet sliding and slipping on the ice beneath her. Will's face was alarmed as he skated forward to catch her, but El quickly used her powers to hold herself upright, wiping at her dripping nose distractedly as her firmed her jaw, determination rising inside her.

El slid her feet forward, one at a time, every movement clumsy and unskilled but soon she was skating wobbily across the thick ice, a wide brilliant smile creasing her cheeks as she made it from one side of the pond to the other without falling once.

'Woo! Go El!' Max, who had been an expert from the minute she stepped onto the ice, her balance perfect from skating all these years, called out to her, coming over and skating around her in a circle that had El laughing.

El let her eyes flutter shut as she began to glide over the smooth surface, her heart racing in her chest as pure elation rushed through her. It was the best feeling, she thought, as the icy wind rushed through her curls, blowing them back from her face. It felt like sledding had. Or what she felt every time Mike pressed his lips to hers. Like flying or floating on air. It was completely freeing. She felt like she could do anything in that moment. It was...amazing.

I wish Mike could feel it too, she thought, her stomach dropping slightly as she opened her eyes and found Mike sitting on the edge of the lake, watching their friends with an almost wistful look on his face, dark eyes faraway, lost in his own thoughts.

She bit her lip, worrying it between her teeth as her expression grew thoughtful, before she let it go with a quiet pop, her lips stretching up into a wide smile as an idea slipped into her head.

Maybe there is a way he can feel this way too, she thought, barely resisting the urge to let out the giddy laugh that bubbled up in chest. It was her turn to surprise him.

Mike rested his chin on his knees as he watched his friend's skate across the ice, laughing quietly as Dustin turned in dizzying circles as Lucas, Will and Max cheered him on, almost slipping onto his butt as he came to an abrupt halt, slapping a hand to his mouth, looking slightly nauseous from all the spinning.

It was nice to see them having so much fun, even if he wasn't able to join. His Mom was right, he'd definitely gotten way more clumsier since he'd grown those last three inches, he thought, glaring down at his long legs. But he truly didn't mind as long as everyone else was having a good time.

Mike felt a tiny tendril of guilt uncurl inside him, twisting his insides as he looked at his friends. He'd been so distant and withdrawn from them all over the last year, spending more time in his basement than he did with them, coming up with half-assed excuses for not wanting to hang out. He'd even stopped writing campaigns, not having the heart to write about adventures, battling monsters and other creatures, and saving damsels in distress when he couldn't stop the monster and save the girl he'd so desperately wanted to. He knew they understood, probably more so now than they had before, since El had come back and they'd realised his true feelings for her, something he'd deliberately hidden from them over that long, miserable year. He hadn't wanted to see the pity on their faces, to hear their words that would be meant to comfort but would have only made him sink further into the dark hole of longing and quickly fading hope that he'd dug himself into, since it was clear that they had all thought El was gone for good. They didn't hold it against him, and had told him themselves when they'd apologised for not helping him look, for not believing him after they'd taken down the Mind Flayer, but he couldn't help but feel terrible for abandoning them like he had, for being so prickly, snapping at them constantly, and for not wanting Max to join the group. seeing her as nothing but an interloper, someone the others wanted to replace El with.

He was dragged from his thoughts as he heard the scrape of skates against ice and lifted his head, smiling as El came to a unsteady stop

in front of him, looking adorable in her bright red beanie and puffy white jacket borrowed from Nancy, her cheeks flushed and rosy with cold.

Her face crumpled slightly, eyebrows drawing together as she took him in, the smile that didn't quite reach his eyes, some emotion she couldn't name darkening them. She reached down to touch the corner of his mouth, and the way it was still slightly down-turned, pulling it up slightly.

'You're sad?'

Mike quickly shook his head, placing his hands over hers on his face, caressing it gently with his thumb.

'No, I'm okay, I promise. Just thinking', he reassured her.

El narrowed her eyes slightly, and Mike can almost hear the words "friend's don't lie" in his head, lips twitching in amusement, before El nodded, choosing not to push it. Her warm brown eyes brightened as if she'd suddenly remembered something and she smiled at him, pulling her hand back to hold it out to him.

'Skate with me?'

Mike's cheeks grew bright red as he glanced over at the ice with a quiet sigh.

'I'm not very good at it. I'd just slow you down', he said, face falling slightly. He'd really wanted to be able to share this with El, her very first time ice skating. But he was just completely useless on the ice, unable to keep his footing, and knew he'd just make a fool of himself or worse hurt both of them in the process of trying. He didn't think he could ever forgive himself if he hurt her because of his clumsiness. And he was certain Hopper would kill him for it.

Mike gulped at the thought, paling slightly as the image of a pissed off Jim Hopper coming after him flitting through his mind, shuddering. Yeah, he was definitely not risking that!

El shrugged, the half-smile he loved curving up the corner of her mouth.

'Me either. It's okay, Mike. No-one is good at everything. We can not be good at it together.'

Mike's face softened, his insides melting at her words, as he realised what she was truly saying, her face lit up with eagerness, wiggling her fingers at him in an impatient, hopeful way that had him laughing.

El wanted to share this with him just as much as he did, he thought, even if it was meant that they both fell on their faces- which was pretty much guaranteed to happen. But that didn't matter to either of them. As long as they were together...it would be perfect.

Mike eagerly rose to his feet, giving her a small crooked smile, the same one he'd given her when she'd returned to him, and took the hand she still held out, his fingers curling around hers.

El's heart clenched at the way he was looking at her, those weird fluttering things coming to life in her stomach again as she tugged him upwards abruptly, their noses bumping as they moved too quickly. They stared at each other for a few seconds before both erupting into giggles, leaning their foreheads against one another.

'I'm glad you're here, El. That we get to do all this together,' Mike whispered, the words just for her to hear, as he kissed her red nose, grinning when her cheeks flushed a bright pink. Finally, he added silently, throat tightening slightly at the realisation that this was truly real. She was really here.

'Me too,' El said, her eyes on his dark ones, smiling, before her expression suddenly grew mischevious and she tugged on his hand, grinning as she pulled him out on the ice.

Mike stumbled across the ice, tripping over his own skates, blushing bright red with embarrassment but El only tightened her hold on his waist, pressing a kiss to his hot cheek as she led him to the very edge of the oval pond, lifting her eyes to his.

'I want to show you something. Do you trust me?'

Mike's mouth fell open slightly in disbelief that she would even

question it and nodded at her, expression fierce.

'Of course.'

El beamed, before she slowly let go off his waist, taking his hand with hers, squeezing it tighter when he slid slightly.

'Okay, hold on tight,' she said, before her face shifted into a familiar expression, her eyes squinting in concentration, and Mike could only frown in confusion, unsure why she would be using her powers right now.

His confusion quickly faded as he felt a sudden press behind him, like a solid wall of wind was pushing against him back, and felt his heart begin to race as they began to move across the ice at an almost dizzying speed, his hand clutching at hers, eyes popping wide.

Holy shit, they were...they were literally gliding across the ice, something he'd never experienced before. He felt his face break into a wide, ecstatic grin, his bright dark eyes dropping to hers where she giggled beside him, expression triumphant as they raced across the pond, their friend's gaping as they passed, letting out quiet whoops of excitement as they began to chase them.

He liked it, El thought as Mike let out a loud laugh, his fingers tightening on hers as they neared the other end of the pond, so much happiness rushing into her she felt like she would explode from it. She'd done it. She'd helped him feel what skating was really like.

Both their hearts jumped as El's skate suddenly got caught on a rough bit of ice, skidding and wobbling uncontrollably for a second before they were thrown into the air. They landed on a soft pile of snow face first, the shock of the icy wetness soaking into their pants and jackets making them both gasp with shock, the air having been knocked from their lungs.

El lifted her head from the snow, turning wide surprised eyes to stare at Mike as he flipped onto his back, expression stunned. His face was completely covered in snow, looking like one of the snow man El had seen in her book, his dark eyes and mop of thick black hair the only thing visible over it. She pressed a hand to her mouth as laughter

bubbled up from her chest, laughing uncontrollably as she fell back into the snow, stomach clenching painfully as tears of mirth ran down her cheeks.

'You...look...so...funny,' she managed to gasp out breathlessly.

Mike mock-glared at her, his own chest shuddering with held back laughter as he swiped a hand over his face to get rid of the snow there, wiggling in closer to her.

'Yeah cause you look so much better,' he teased, brushing the snow that coated her cheeks off with gentle, gloved fingers, his lips quirking into a wide smile at the obvious joy on her face.

Guess the plan is actually working, he thought, as he reached out to brush back one her curls, his cheeks aching with how big his smile was. Who knew that it work on him as well? He had felt so much happier since El's return only a month before, but the hole in his chest, the aching, gaping emptiness that he'd lived with all the time she'd been gone and he was sure would never truly heal, now completely gone. He had her back, and he knew he would never let her go again.

El stilled as she saw Mike's grow suddenly heated, lifting her hands to trace her fingers across his face. Mike shivered at her touch, his skin tingling as her fingers ran across his cheek, even through the thick layer of wool that separated their skin.

El's breath caught in her throat as Mike suddenly leant down and pressed his lips to hers, his mouth shockingly warm against hers in the cold. She moved her lips against his, this kiss different to the ones they'd shared before, longer and just...more.

She liked it.

Mike closed his eyes as he cupped her cheek in one hand, the other settling around her waist instinctively. He didn't think he would ever get over kissing her. It was definitely his favourite thing in the world. The way it made him forget everything else around him, like they were the only two people who existed in the world in that moment, and he could swear he was floating.

They both jumped, letting out cries of surprise as something slammed into their backs, splattering them with cold, wetness. They pulled apart, turning to both stare at Dustin where he stood across from them, raising his eyebrows at them, expression amused, while he threw a second snowball up in the air.

'Come on, guys, suck face later. It's time for hot chocolate,' he said, tone excited as he turned back to where the others had gathered on the side of the bank, pouring out a thick brown liquid into small cups from thermoses Nancy had handed them when she dropped them off almost an hour ago.

El sighed, and Mike grumbled irritably under his breath, as they pushed themselves to their feet, slowly trudging through the snow towards their friends. Mike frowned when El began to slow behind him, a strange look on her face.

'Hey, you okay?' he asked, stopping in front of her, head cocked to the side, expression concerned.

El blushed bright red at his question, biting her lip as she ducked her head slightly, speaking so quietly Mike had to move in closer to hear her.

'Yeah...I just....my bottom hurts from falling'.

Mike pressed his lips together to keep from laughing, not wanting to embarrass her further, giving her a sympathetic look as he felt his own behind give an uncomfortable throb, resisting the urge to rub it where it was definitely bruised.

'Mine too', he said, in a conspiratory whisper, winking at her as she lifted her head to blink at him.

El couldn't help the giggle that escaped her at his words, leaning her head against his arm with a sigh as they walked along. Mike pressed his lips to her head as they reached their friend's, holding back a sigh as she pulled away to go grab some hot chocolate, laughing as Dustin handed it to her with an exaggerated flourish, bowing slightly.

God, he wished he didn't have to go to stupid Florida on Christmas

Eve, he thought suddenly as he watched El take a small sip of the hot chocolate curiously, her eyes widening to an almost comical level as the taste hit her tongue, draining it down with a sudden ravenous gulp, her infamous sweet-tooth loving the sweet drink.

He hadn't even told El yet, knowing how devastated she would be to be separated again so soon, a feeling he knew all too much about.

His parent's had dropped the plans on Mike and Nancy that morning and they were furious. Nancy didn't want to leave Jonathan for the two weeks left of the Christmas break, and Mike didn't want to miss out on Christmas with El and his friend's. It wasn't fair. If only there was a way he could get out of it...so he could stay...but his parents would never agree to it anyway.

'So did you tell her?' Will asked as he came up stand beside him, holding out a cup of hot chocolate.

Mike sighed, running a hand over his face before he took the held out cup, taking a quick sip, quickly pulling it away as it burnt his tongue. Jeez, how had El drank it so quickly? It was so hot!

'No,' he said, shaking his head, 'I don't know how to. I don't want to make her sad again, especially since she's been so happy lately. What am I going to do, Will? It's not like I can just stay here.'

Will gave Mike a sad look, patting his back softly in sympathy before he suddenly paused, expression growing thoughtful. He glanced between Mike and El for a second, bouncing from side to side before he turned to Mike, a excited smile lighting up his face.

'What if you could?'

'Huh?' Mike said, eyebrows drawing together in confusion, and Will moved in closer,

'No, seriously, listen...' Will said, dropping his voice down to a whisper, waving Mike in so only the two of them could hear.

As Will whispered his plan to Mike, he couldn't help the huge grin that spread across his face, stomach clenching with excitement as his hands began to shake.

Holy shit...this might...this might actually work!

'Will, you are freaking brilliant, you know that?' he asked, eyes bright as he beamed at one of his best friend's and Will blushed slightly, shrugging his shoulders in false nonchalance.

'Oh, I know,' he said, laughing as Mike threw an arm over his shoulder and they moved over to their others friends, grinning so widely the others gave them odd looks before shrugging it off, both of them eager to head home and put Will's brilliant plan into motion.

**Notes for the Chapter:**

> What did you all think? As always let me know xx-Katie

## 6. you and me here...underneath the mistletoe...

**Notes for the Chapter:**

> Hey everyone! Thank, thank you, thank you for all the wonderful reviews! I'm going to answer them today, I promise! And here it is, the next chapter! I was actually stunned by how long this chapter was when I had a read through. I hope you love it as much as the others xx

When El woke up on the fifth and sadly the final day of their Christmas Plan, she kicked back her sheets eagerly, slipping across the floor on socked feet as she rushed out to see Hopper, who had promised to take the day off so he could take her over to Joyce's early. It was their last day and she planned to spend as much time with her friend's before they had to go back to the two day rule as possible.

'Morning Hopp', she said, practically skipping over to the table where a pile of Eggos were already sitting waiting for her beside a bowl of porridge that made her stick out her tongue.

Bleugh! She hated porridge. It was all lumpy and tasteless, no matter how much syrup and sugar she mixed in it. She wished she'd never made that deal with Hopper that she'd eat her porridge before Eggos every morning. But...a deal was a deal, as he always told her, and she reluctantly picked up her spoon, plugging her nose and shovelling the awful stuff into her mouth.

She was so lost in her own thoughts, impatient to be done with breakfast and on her way to the Byer's that she didn't notice Hopper where he stood by the window, a worried scowl on his face, rubbing his chin as he glanced at El over his shoulder, giving a heavy sigh.

God, this is not going to go down well, he thought, tugging back the blinds from the window slowly as he silently braced himself for the tantrum that was sure to follow.

'Hey kid,' he began, huffing out a breath from his nose as she turned

to look at him, the bright smile on her face dimming slightly as she took in his frown, her eyes going wide with worry, 'I know you had this plan to go to the Byer's today and build snow men but I don't think that's going to happen. There was a huge storm last night and it's just too dangerous to be out there right now.'

El's heart dropped as she jumped off her chair and ran to the window, face falling as she saw the swirling mass of white that raged outside the window, her chin wobbling as tears filled her eyes. The snow was so thick, being thrown about by the force of the winds that seemed to shriek, like it was mad, she couldn't even see out past where she knew the trip-wire was.

'I'm sorry, El', Hopper said, brushing a hand over her head gently, 'I know you were looking forward to it.'

El shook her head, pulling away, ducking her head as she ran from the room, slamming the door behind her.

'Shit,' Hopper groaned, rubbing his eyes with his thumb. This was not going to be a good day.

**

The crackle of his Supercom coming to life made Mike jolt awake, blinking blearily in his dark room, the closed curtains keeping all the light out. He glanced at his alarm clock, stunned to see it was already nine and reached over to snatch the supercom off his desk, pressing the button to speak as he yawned.

'What?' he said, grumpily, pushing his floppy hair back from his eyes.

'Mike...'

Mike sat up so quickly he almost hit his head on the headboard of his bed, eyes popping wide when El's voice came through the speakers, her voice trembling like it did when he knew she was about to cry.

What was going on? Was she hurt? Did she get in a fight with Hopper? Had the Bad Men come back?

'El? What's wrong ? Are you okay?'

El sniffled into the Supercom, her arms wrapped around her knees as she listened to Mike's voice come through, breath hiccupping.

'It's snowing really bad. Hopper says we can't go outside. That it's too dangerous. Now I won't be able to see you.'

Mike shook his head as her words came through, pushing off his bed frantically and reached over to pull back the curtains that hung over his window. He stared out at the snow storm, mouth hanging open in disbelief. He had never seen a storm this bad before. It seemed to have a mind of it's own, the wind rattling the glass of his window so hard he was surprised it didn't smash, the snow all the way up to the tyres of his dad's car.

What were they going to do? There was no way he couldn't see El today. This was their last full day together for god knew how long and they'd had a plan. He'd promised her that they would all celebrate Christmas together, that they would have the whole five days. And they never broke promises to one another.

His mind raced, desperately trying to figure a way to make it better, to somehow get to her. He began to pace across the floor, his breath coming in slightly panicked gasps as he tugged on his hair in frustration. Think, Mike, think!

'Mike?' El's voice came back through the Supercom, tone confused, not sure why he wasn't answering.

'I'm here', Mike said quickly in reply, not wanting to worry her anymore than he could tell she already was. 'It's okay, El. Don't worry. I'll call the others and we'll figure something out. We'll see each other today, even if I have to walk to the cabin myself. I promise you.'

El tried to blink back the tears that threatened to spill over onto her cheeks and nodded, before remembering that he couldn't see her.

'Okay. If you can't, I'll come to you. I don't care if I get in trouble'.

'No, El...don't do that! What if you got lost? Or sick? No, it's better if I get in trouble...'

Hopper sighed where he stood just beyond the closed door, his fist still hovering in the air where he'd been about to knock to try and comfort El, and pulled back from the door, not wanting to get caught eavesdropping.

Could these two be anymore devoted to one another? he wondered, wandering off to sit at the kitchen table. They were willing to brave a snow storm and go around him, risking his anger, just to see each other. What other kids they're age could say that? He knew some married couples who wouldn't do as much for the other, who didn't care as much as they did.

Well, he couldn't let the Wheeler kid die of exposure, could he? he thought, shaking his head wryly. That was definitely a drama he didn't need and, well, he kinda liked the kid, a fact he was keeping to himself. A little fear was good for the boy his adopted-daughter was dating, he thought, chuckling quietly to himself even as he reached for the phone, dialling a number he knew by heart.

It rang for a few seconds before a soft voice answered, and Hopper leant on his elbow, unaware of the smile that had spread across his face at hearing Joyce's voice.

'Hey, it's me.'

'Hey Hopp. Have you seen this storm? Will and the other boys are going insane trying to figure out a way to still get together over their Supercoms...'

'That's actually what I was calling about. I have an idea I want to run by you.'

**

'What the hell was I thinking?' he muttered under his breath as he squinted through the sheets of white slamming against the windscreen of the truck, his fingers clenched tightly on the steering wheel, barely able to see the road in front of him.

Jesus, I'm losing my touch if two thirteen year olds being sad about not seeing each other makes me risk my damn life, he thought, as he

glanced into the rear-view at the four kids currently squished into the back of his truck, talking excitedly as they bounced around, leaning around each other, gaily wrapped presents sitting on each of their laps.

No matter how hard he tried, however, he just couldn't seem to work up the energy to be mad about it. Even thinking about the hour he'd spent digging his truck out of the snow and having to go out into the blisteringly cold weather four times to battle his way to the kids doorways to pick them, or the fact that he was driving at the maddening slow ten miles an hour just so he didn't crash into a pole, didn't worry him. Because the excitement radiating off El when he'd dropped her off at Joyce's at attending her very first Christmas party, even an impromptu and hastily put together one that Hopper, secretly, didn't think really counted, made it all seem worth the effort.

Hopper jumped, dragged from his thoughts as the red-headed kid...Max, wasn't it?....suddenly pointed at something ahead of them, her hand almost hitting his ear as she sat forward, bouncing in her seat.

'Isn't that the driveway?'

Hopper breathed a sigh of a relief as he saw the familiar mailbox up ahead and turned down the lane as the kids let out a triumphant whoops, barely resisting the urge to lean his head against the steering wheel for a few seconds as he finally parked in front of the house.

'Good work, Chief', Dustin said, patting him on the shoulder, clicking off the seatbelt that Lucas and him were sharing for the ride, a fact that Hopper was ignoring since it wasn't technically legal...and anyways, he was the Chief of police, who was going to question it? Nobody, that's who.

Hopper lifted his head to glare half-heartedly at him, before shaking his head in amusement as they scrambled from the car, pushing his door open.

'Let's just not make a habit of it', he said, biting back a grin as he saw Lucas, Dustin and Max all rolled their eyes, already making their way

towards the front door. Smart-asses.

'Uh...Chief?'

Hopper stopped, glancing over his shoulder at Mike who hadn't moved from his seat in the cab of the truck, and was squinting at him, tugging on the bow on his present anxiously.

'I just wanted to say thanks', Mike blurted out, his eyes skittering away as he flushed bright red, hating the way his pale skin exposed every feeling he had more than ever in that moment. But he needed to say this. He had his issues with Hopper, and probably wouldn't ever fully forgive him for keeping El from him, though he had come to understand his reasons, but he hadn't had to help them, to come pick them up or organise a way for them to be able to see El today and....he was grateful. More than Hopper probably realised.

Hopper looked at him for a long moment, stomach clenching as he saw the uncertainty and sheer embarrassment in Mike's dark eyes, reaching out to pat his shoulder affectionately.

'It's all good, kid. No need to thank me. Now, come on, let's head in. It's freezing out here,' he said, reaching over to open his door.

Mike gave him a small smile that Hopper was never on the receiving end of and Hopper grinned back.

**

After the gang greeted each other like it had been years instead of less than day since they'd seen each other, they quickly set up a fort of blankets and pillows in the living room around the couch, settling on the floor side by side with spare blankets thrown over their legs, arguing over what Christmas special to watch as Joyce and Hopper watched from the kitchen, amused.

'Come on, the Year without Christmas is so the best Christmas special!' Dustin exclaimed, mouth hanging in disbelief as he glanced at them all, throwing his hands up in the air in exasperation, 'Jeez, no taste around here.'

'You're kidding, right? Please tell me you're joking! Nothing beats

Rudolph', Lucas, of course, argued, shaking his head as if to say 'really dude?'

'Uh...I'm sorry...but the Grinch totally kicks both their asses,' Max said, crossing her legs in front of her, expression smug, as they both turned narrowed-eyes onto her.

'Puh-lease.'

'The Grinch is so lame. He can't even steal Christmas properly...'

'Oh my god, guys, shut up! You're ruining it for El,' Will finally spoke up, shooting Mike an exasperated look while El just looked between all four of them, eyebrows drawn together in complete confusion as she tried to work out what they were talking about.

Who was Rudolph? Why was someone trying to steal Christmas? she thought, growing steadily more anxious. Were they going to ruin their Christmas for them? Who was he? She had to stop him....

Mike could see the anxious thoughts flitting across El's face and quickly scooted in closer, running his fingers soothingly across the back of her hand, smiling when she looked up.

'It's just a cartoon, El. No-one is actually trying to steal Christmas.'

El let out a sigh of such relief that Mike chuckled and leant his head against hers, his fingers continuing to trace circles on her skin unconsciously.

They finally agreed on 'Frosty the Snowman' and 'A Charlie Brown Christmas', settling in front of the television with mugs of hot chocolate with three marshmallows each and hot dogs that Joyce had cooked up to keep them warm. El snuck her marshmallows into Mike's mug when she saw how much he liked them, his eyes lighting up as he scooped them from the sweet liquid before they'd even had a chance to get all gooey. The others 'awed' loudly when they saw, making kissy noses and whistling until Mike glared at them, threatening to kill them off in the next campaign if they didn't shut it. Lucas and Dustin quickly turned back to the television, eyes wide, while Will just smirked at Mike, raising his eyebrows, amused by how

red Mike's cheeks were, almost lighting up the darkness of the fort.

El adored the first one, eyes huge in her face, and her hand pressed to her heart as the melted Frosty came back to life and went off to live at the North Pole with Santa Claus. It quickly became clear to the gang, however, that El definitely DID NOT like 'A Charlie Brown Christmas' when the television suddenly flicked off, the screen going black as the Christmas lights on the Byer's tree began to flick ominously.

Will flinched quietly, Dustin jumping back with a loud yelp, as they all stared at the tree in shock before turning as one to look at El, shifting back warily as they found her glaring at the blank screen, eyebrows lowered, fingers clenched in fists on her knees as a trail of blood dripped from her nose.

'Uh...El?' Lucas began nervously, glancing at Mike out of the corner of his eye, silently begging for him to do something, anything, the fury scrunching up El's face completely terrifying.

'They're not friend's!' El said, voice dangerously low, jaw clenching tightly, powers flickering out again making the lights glow even brighter as her eyes narrowed slightly, 'You don't treat friend's that way. They're being mean to Charlie Brown!'

Mike's lips twitched, using every ounce of his self-control to hold back a laugh, not wanting to upset El any further or worse have her anger suddenly turned on him and rubbed her back to get her attention, her head snapping towards him, warm brown eyes sparking.

'You're right. They're not very nice to him at the beginning but they do something nice in the end to make up for it. You'll see.'

El looked at him for a long moment, before nodding, though she didn't look like she quite believed him, and jerked her chin at the television, turning the show back on as the others let out muffled sighs of relief, shoulders relaxing as they saw her anger fade slightly.

Holy shit, Max thought, slightly stunned. Note to self, never get on El's bad side. She could get crazy scary when she wanted to be. Bad-

ass....but scary. She didn't even want to imagine what she looked like when facing a real monster or bad guy.

She shook her head, forcing herself back into the present, and leant her head against Lucas's shoulder. A small smile tilted up the corner of her mouth as Lucas subtly rested his cheek against her head, his pinkie curling around hers underneath the blanket.

Her mind drifted to the last few days, a rush of pure delight settling into her chest, the sudden urge to giggle, something she definitely didn't do ever, almost irresistible. Lucas and her had been hanging out by themselves over the last few days, going to Lucas's house and even to the cinemas last night, keeping it a secret from the others, wanting to avoid the teasing they'd knew would be coming for them, especially with all the teasing they'd been giving Mike and El since she'd returned. It was at their date last night, while waiting for Lucas's Mom to pick them both up and take them home, that they shared their second kiss, both of them blushing so much they'd been able to feel the heat radiating from each other's faces, and had decided to be boyfriend and girlfriend.

I could do worse, Max thought jokingly as she peeked up at him, cuddling in closer as she turned to watch the rest of the special.

Lucas ducked his head, hiding the grin that was stretching his cheeks from his friend's as he felt Max's fingers slip between his, not wanting them to see how deliriously happy he was, knowing the inevitable teasing that would follow if they saw how goofy he looked in that moment. He hadn't been able to stop smiling since his Mom had picked him up from his date with Max last night, and he didn't think the giddy rush of happiness that filled him every time he looked at her would go away anytime soon.

He was dating Max Mayfield. Max was his girlfriend. How the hell had he ever gotten so lucky? He couldn't wait to tell everyone, even if it meant the guys teased the hell out of him. It would so be worth it for the entire school to know he was dating the coolest, most beautiful, hot-headed, sarcastic, and fun girl he'd ever met.

He felt a nudge against his side and looked over to see Mike watching him, glancing between Max and him pointedly, raising on eyebrow as

he jerked his head down to where he could just make out the shapes of their hand's clasped together under the blanket.

'Are you?' he mouthed over El's head where she leant against him.

Lucas glanced down at Max quickly, relaxing as he saw she was totally absorbed in the special, and nodded covertly, answering Mike's question, his cheeks flushing.

Mike grinned at him, giving him a quick thumbs up.

'About time, man', he mouthed.

Lucas grinned back, before turning back to the television, wiggling in closer to Max, eyes softening as she laid her head against his chest, heart feeling like it was going to jump out of his chest.

It felt good to have one of the guys know. He'd been so worried that they'd tease him or have a problem with Max and him being together, especially Mike, but seeing him so happy for him made the worry disintegrate completely. He should have known he'd be happy for him no matter what. He may not have liked Max in the beginning, and Lucas understood now that he'd thought they were trying to replace El, but he'd definitely been making a real effort lately, including Max in more outings and even giving her own place in the D & D campaigns, something he knew Max was beyond ecstatic about, even if she was trying not to show it. Yeah, Mike was a good friend.

As the credits for the Christmas special ran over the screen, El had to reluctantly admit the ending of the special was good ("They got him the perfect tree just like you did for me", she exclaimed, making them all blush and smile at her), but she still didn't completely forgive them for being mean to their friend. Friend's were special. They were the people you did anything for, that you protected and fought for, and who you never treated badly. It was one of the first things El had learnt and it was what she lived her life by, just like friend's don't lie and promises are something you can never break. Not ever.

Will glanced at the clock, his eyes widening in surprise, and turned to his friend's with a glum look.

'It's already four. We better swap presents before Hopper has to take you all home,' he said, with a disappointed sigh, reluctantly getting to his feet with the others, all of their faces falling as they walked over to where they'd sat all their presents on the coffee table.

I can't believe it's almost over, Will thought, his shoulders slumping forward. It sucked that they couldn't just spend Christmas Eve and even Christmas together as a group. They usually meet up Christmas night at Mike's and had a D & D session but even that wasn't happening this year, with Mike's family heading to Florida, and even if they could have, El wouldn't have been able to come, not with Mr and Mrs. Wheeler still knowing her as nothing but the Russian spy the Bad Men had claimed she was. He would just have to be happy with the plans Mike and him had made, plans that to their complete astonishment both their parent's had given permission for.

'Come on, guys, this is supposed to be fun', Dustin said suddenly as he plopped down onto the floor, his present in his hands, giving them a wide, encouraging grin, 'We'll see each other after Christmas. And we'll still be able to see El twice a week. This is not the end of the world'.

El gave Dustin a small smile, her sadness at everything ending fading slightly as she went to sit cross-legged beside him, bumping his shoulder with her own.

'Not the end of the world,' she repeated and Dustin grinned at her, patting her shoulder.

'See El gets it! Now hurry up, I want to open some presents.'

They all laughed at the eagerness in Dustin's voice and sat down in a small circle, everyone pulling out their slip of paper to announce who their Secret Santa was.

'Okay, Lucas, you pulled the first slip of paper so you go first...' Dustin said, taking charge, nodding at him to begin.

Hopper glanced at the group from where he was sitting at the table with Joyce, both of them sipping coffee as they talked quietly, jerking his head to the side subtly.

'Want to go have a smoke break? Give the kids some privacy?' he said, lowering his voice so only the two of them could hear, not wanting to interrupt them.

Joyce glanced over at the window, seeing the storm had died down slightly and nodded with a smile, both of them getting up quietly and making there way to the front door, sneaking past the circle of teenagers with a small smile. They didn't notice when
El glanced over at them as they walked out, her lips curling up into a small smirk as she saw where they were headed. Just like she knew they would and her, and Max who had helped, had planned on.

**

Hopper closed the door behind them, his breath shuddering out, quickly tugging his jacket closer around him as the frigid cold wind blew across the porch, reaching into his pocket for the packet of cigarettes he habitually stored there. He held one out to Joyce which she took with a smile, lighting it quickly and taking a long drawl, blowing out the smoke with a sigh.

'Well, it looks like the "Christmas party" has been a hit?' Joyce said, smiling as she heard the loud excited shouts and laughter coming from inside the house.

Hopper chuckled, his cigarette hanging from his mouth, as he shook his head wryly.

'I don't think El's ever been this excited for anything in her life. She had me racing to the shops last night for a present for the Henderson kid, something about Secret Santa that she had forgotten about, and for Mike of course. And thank god she did because I'd completely forgotten to do any shopping for it myself,' Hopper admitted, expression sheepish and Joyce let out a loud laugh.

'Jeesh, Hop, cutting it a bit close, don't you think? El definitely wouldn't have been happy with you for that one.'

Hopper nodded, deliberately making his eyes go wide with fake fear.

'The kid can forgive a lot but you're right. There's no way that would

have gone down well. The cabin would definitely have payed for that one,' he said with a quiet laugh, his eyes growing pensive as he thought of the last time El had done damage to the cabin when she'd come back from trying to see Mike, throwing a telekinetic tantrum that made him realise the extent of her feelings, how truly devastated, frustrated and hurt she was at not being able to speak to him. To tell him she was okay and alive and missing him.

I really didn't handle that one very well, he thought, tapping his fingers against the beam at the front of the porch, lip twitching down into a sad frown. But he was going to do better this time. No matter what it was going to be different this year. He'd promised and he meant it.

Joyce's face softened as she watched the way his face suddenly fell, growing so sad and regretful, and couldn't help but reach over to squeeze his arm, drawing his surprised blue eyes to hers.

'You're doing a good job, Jim. El adores you. You'd have to be blind not to see it.'

Hopper's face softened and he smiled as he glanced through the windows to where he could just see the kids opening presents, shouting over atop each other, his eyes shifting to El where she sat beside Dustin and Will, her smile so big it looked like it would be permanent soon. As it should be.

'I didn't think I could do it again, Joyce. Be a parent...let someone in again like that after...after Sarah. I wasn't going to let myself care. I swore to myself I wouldn't get attached to her. But before I knew it the kid...El...she was everything to me. And I was suddenly terrified. So scared that I would lose her somehow, that they'd find her and take her away from me or one day she'd just have enough of the waiting and being hidden in the cabin and I'd come back and she'd be just gone. Hell, I'm still terrified that she'll decide she doesn't want me...that she'll want to go live with her Mama and Aunt Becky instead but even with all that...all the fear and the doubts, all the worrying that I'm doing the wrong thing or somehow screwing her up, I'm so glad I took that chance. That I let her in. She was worth taking the chance for,' he said, turning back, surprised to see the gentle smile gracing Joyce's face as she stubbed out her cigarette,

stepping forward to grasp his hand.

'You look happy. It's about damn time'.

Hopper glanced away, his cheeks flushing slightly, coughing to try and get rid of the lump that had suddenly formed in his throat. Get a grip, man, he thought, shaking his head at himself.

Joyce nose crinkled as she watched his cheeks growing a light pink, opening her mouth to tease him about it when something swayed above their heads, her eyes flicking up and widening at what she found there.

'Uh...Hop?'

'Yeah?' Hopper asked, raising his eyebrows when he saw the way Joyce was looking at him, her lips twitching into an amused grin.

'You wouldn't happen to have an ulterior motive for bringing me out here, would you?' she said, jerking her chin upwards, eyes twinkling with amusement.

'What?' Hopper said, his head snapping upwards to where Joyce was looking and almost choked when he spotted the mistletoe hanging above the exact spot where they usually smoked, swaying innocently in the icy wind, the bright red berries on the plant almost seeming to wink at him as they shifted in the pale light.

'What the fuck?' he said, tone so shocked Joyce burst out laughing, slapping a hand to her mouth, 'Who the hell would have put that there....?'

Hopper could almost the hear a bell going off in his head as he remembered the sly look in El's eyes the day she'd caught him staring at Joyce and almost groaned aloud, running a hand down over his face with a muttered oath.

Damn match-making kid! He was going to give her a freaking damn good talking to when he had the chance.

'El', he said, cheeks growing even redder as Joyce's head towards him, blinking at him in confusion as she reached up to touch the leaves of

the mistletoe.

'El?'

'Yeah...uh...I think she's trying to get us...you know...together. I don't know where she got the idea from...' he trailed off, shoulder jerking in some form of a shrug, his face feeling like it was on fire.

Big fat liar, a voice said in his head, a voice that sounded just like El, and he mentally batted it away, letting out the groan he'd been trying to hold back, reaching up to pinch the bridge of his nose. Okay, so maybe he did know where got that idea from but they'd have to bloody torture him before he'd admit it aloud. The real medieval shit type torture.

'How does she even know what mistletoe is? And where the hell did she get it?' he asked, voice thick with utter bewilderment.

Joyce's expression grew sheepish as she pushed her hair back from her face, lip twitching at how red Hopper had gotten.

Who knew a tiny piece of mistletoe could reduce the Big Bad Hopper into a stuttering teenager?

'I told her about it. We were making cookies the other day and she asked what the mistletoe shaped cookie cutter was and well...' she said, shrugging, unconcerned, before tilting her head to the side as Hopper glanced over at the door, muttering under his breath irritably.

Welcome to parenthood, Hop, she thought, biting back a laugh.

Joyce bit her lip before grinning suddenly, the urge to tease him irresistible.

'Well...it is tradition, Hopp. No point wasting good mistletoe.'

She expected him to choke or laugh at least, but everything inside Joyce jolted, coming on high alert, as Hopper went still in front of her, his broad chest stopping completely, as if he was holding his breath.

Joyce suddenly couldn't breath properly, feeling like her lungs had stopped working as Hopper slowly turned towards her, his bright blue eyes shifting and holding hers.

Her heart stuttered in her chest, eyes going wide as she inhaled sharply in surprise at the look in those eyes, eyes that she knew almost as well as her own in the mirror. She knew how they changed with every emotion, going blank when he was lying or trying to hide something, how they danced with laughter, narrowed in teasing, or went dull and shuttered with sadness. But this...she'd never seen this look in his eyes before. Not when he was looking at her anyway. The way they had darkened, seeming to burn with an intense and sudden hunger that made her stomach clench, something hot settling deep inside her. But they were so unsure at the same time, filled with such tenderness that it made her want to cry, tears prickling at the back of her eyes.

Hopper swallowed hard, a tiny flare of hope coming to life inside him that he couldn't quite manage to bury as Joyce stared back at him, the same nerves and longing he could feel inside him, that he always felt when he was with Joyce, reflected on her face.

Her eyes dipped to his lips for just a second and Hopper couldn't hold back any longer, moving before he realised he'd even made the decision. He cupped her face gently in his hands, running his thumb along her cheekbone, his heart racing so fast he was sure she could hear it. Hell, he was positive the kids in the next room could hear it, it was slamming so hard against his ribs.
He leant down slowly, giving Joyce a chance to pull away if she wanted to, feeling his breath catch in his chest when she instead leant forward, her breath falling across his cheek and pressed his lips against hers with a groan, eyes sliding shut.

Joyce's fingers twitched uselessly by her side for a second, stunned by the flash of heat that shot through her as Hopper's lips moved over hers, before she pushed up onto her toes, wanting...no, needing...to get closer, grasping just above his elbows with a breathy sigh.

She brushed her lips hesitantly back against his, her confidence growing as she felt his hands tremble against her cheeks in reaction, reaching up to curl her fingers into the hair at the back of his neck.

Hopper ran his hand down her spine through her thick winter jacket, settling at the small of her back and tugged her in closer until they were pressed firmly together, until not a single inch of them didn't touch.

Warmth spread through her from where their lips touched all the way down to her toes and Joyce squirmed against Hopper, smiling against his lips as she felt him chuckle slightly at that, a laugh bubbling up inside her.

God, this feels...incredible...and so so right, she thought, running her arms down his back, and she knew in that moment that kissing him once would never be enough.

She hadn't thought she'd ever feel this way again. Not after losing...after losing Bob. Joyce felt a surge of guilt rise inside her as she thought his name, as she remembered everything they had shared but she pushed it away determinedly, not wanting to be sad in that moment. She'd been sad for so long. No, she wouldn't feel guilty for feeling...for living again, even for just a moment. She'd loved Bob so much but he was gone and she couldn't bring him back no matter how much she wanted to. And she knew he wouldn't want her to be sad forever. He just wasn't that type of man. Bob had been so kind and open, and had lived his life so fully, loved so fully, enjoying every single of the time he had. He'd want that for her too. And if there was anyone she knew he'd approve of....it'd be Hopper. And for herself...she truly couldn't remember a time where she hadn't loved Jim Hopper, no matter how much she'd tried to deny it, even to herself.

Hopper didn't want the moment to end, didn't want to move away from the warmth of her, her gentle touch sending shivers down his spine, the feeling of her slight body pressed against his everything he had dreamed it would be. But his lungs were burning, screaming for air, and he knew she must be feeling the same way so he reluctantly pulled back.

They gulped down air, their breathing so loud in the sudden quiet between them, ears buzzing so they couldn't even hear the storm still raging two feet away from them.

He pressed his forehead to hers, opening his eyes to look at her and felt his insides melt as he saw the wide, dazed look in her dark eyes, her cheeks flushed a pretty pink and he couldn't help the pride that filled him at being able to make her look like that.

'Well...that was...' Joyce swallowed, letting out a small breathless laugh, unable to finish the sentence. There just wasn't a word that could give it justice. Mind-blowingly good didn't even cover it.

Hopper didn't answer, his eyes searching hers for a long second before he reached over to tuck a bit of her hair behind her ear so gently Joyce's chin wobbled slightly, leaning into his touch.

'I know...' he began, voice gruff and full of emotion, 'I know you're still mourning Bob. He was a good man and he deserved better than he got. I don't plan to step in on that but I just want you to know that....whenever you're ready....no matter how long it takes...I'll wait. For you and whatever this is between us.'

Hot tears filled Joyce's eyes, one slipping down her cheek as she lifted up an brushed her trembling lips against his. She sniffled, caressing his stubbly jaw with her fingers, heart clenching at the barely concealed hope in his eyes, his thin lips curling up into a smile that made her heart race.

She knew that if she said no, that she couldn't do this, that he'd accept that without a single question. That he'd never pressure her or bring it up again, and that he'd still be her friend, no matter what. It was just the kind of man he was. Kind and stubborn, gruff and protective, bad-tempered and unbelievably brave and loyal. Jim Hopper had been her friend for almost twenty years but maybe, just maybe it was time for that to change.

No, Joyce thought, shaking her head inwardly as a sudden certainty filled her, something clicking into place inside her, something that she had been denying for so long. No, not maybe. It was definitely time for them to become more than just friends but....just not yet. It was too soon, too soon after losing Bob and she wasn't ready to just forget him and everything he'd meant to her. She couldn't leave him behind just yet. She had loved him and still did.

'I want this too. But...I don't know how long it'll be till I'm ready', Joyce admitted quietly, tangling her fingers with his, squeezing tightly, her lips curling down into a sad smile, 'I won't hold you to it, Hopp, not if when I decide I'm ready you've moved on or changed you're mind...'

Hopper just stared at her, gaping in disbelief, before he shook his head, letting out a small snort, his hands settling gently on her shoulders.

'Yeah, that's going to happen', he said, rolling his eyes, even as he tugged her into his arms, nuzzling her head with his chin, 'I meant what I said, Joyce. I'll wait. I'd wait forever for you.'

Joyce burrowed into his broad chest, closing her eyes as she breathed him in, the smell that clung to his jacket so familiar it made her chest ache, and nodded, hiding her hopeful smile against him.

'I'll hold you to that.'

**

Inside, completely oblivious to the events occurring just outside the front door (well most of them anyways), the present-swapping between the six teenagers was quickly coming to an end.
Will had been completely thrilled with the copy of Ghost Busters on VHS that Lucas had given him, along with a new packet of pencils and crayons, knowing that he'd worn most of his down to stubs during the Mind Flayer episode.

Next it had been El's turn, who Will had given a comic he'd made himself filled with all their adventures from the last year, featuring El as the superhero. It was brightly illustrated by him, with catch-phrases and every person El loved featuring in one way or another. She had hugged him tightly, thanking him so profusely he'd blushed bright red, shrugging off her thanks, just happy she liked it so much. He'd been working on it in secret since the very first planning session for Operation Christmas For El, wanting it to be perfect.

'I'm glad you like it, El.'

Mike had then presented Max with a set of special colouring textas

and stickers he'd found for her to decorate her skateboard with, including some with a few choice swears that made her grin, high-fiving him as she snickered under her breath, sticking them front in centre of her skateboard that she took everywhere with her, no matter the weather.

'Now I can just flip my skateboard up whenever Billy's being a dick and he'll know exactly what I think of him', she said, making the others laugh.

'As if he'll try to mess with you again,' Lucas said, blowing a raspberry in disbelief at the very thought.

'Yeah, not unless he wants to lose his favourite part of his anatomy,' Mike said with a snort of laughter.

Max, who by chance had gotten Mike as her Secret Santa as well, gave him the brand new folder she'd found for him to keep all his D & D adventures he'd written over the years in, as well as a new figurine, a Mage, after Lucas had told her he didn't have that figurine and really wanted to get one to complete their party and so El could join in on campaigns. She had already been given her own character, and place in the party as a Speedster, a character they all agreed suited her perfectly.

'Wow, Max, thanks!' he said, tugging her in for a quick hug, turning the figurine over in his hands almost reverently.

Dustin presented Lucas with a set of specialised rubber balls for his sling shot and a bunch of targets for him to practice with, so he wouldn't have to go scrounging around for the right rock whenever he wanted to use it.

'This is so freaking cool, dude!', Lucas said, his eyes lighting up as he juggled the rubber balls from hand to hand, leg bouncing excitedly, unable to wait to get home so he could try them out.

'You're welcome, man. I guess that leaves you with me, El', Dustin said, holding his hands out as he made a "gimmee" gesture, eyebrows wiggling playfully, 'Well don't hold out on me.'

El laughed quietly before holding out the small white box that sat in her lap, being careful not to jostle it.

Dustin took it from her with a small, perplexed frown, confused about why it wasn't wrapped, and shook it slowly. He almost threw it across the room when he felt something shift inside it and scuttle across the bottom of the box.

'What the hell?' he said, quickly opening up the tabs on the top quickly and blinked down at the tiny green lizard he found cowering slightly in the corner, almost buried under the straw and a small cloth that was keeping it warm. It turned it's head to stare at him, small beady black eyes blinking back.

Dustin's mouth fell open as his hands began to tremble on the box, his chin wobbling slightly, brown eyes filling with tears.

El shuffled in closer, leaning into Dustin's side as she glanced down into the box that she had looked after it like, as Hopper had said, her baby all night, even putting the box in her bed with her to keep it warm until she could give it to Dustin.

'I know you miss your friend, Dart, so I thought you'd like a new friend', she said, reaching inside to run gentle fingers on the lizard's scaly back, smiling as it seemed to preen into her touch, moving in closer.

El's frowned at Dustin worriedly as he just continued to gape down at the contents of the box, her eyebrows drawing together. Oh no, what if he didn't like it?

'It's not from the Upside Down. I made sure Hopp got it from the pet store', she said quickly, trying to reassure him.

She jumped when Dustin suddenly let out a quiet sob and almost tackled her to the floor as he hugged her, rocking her back and forth with surprising strength, squeezing her so hard she let out a loud squeak.

El laughed as her shock faded, patting Dustin's back comfortingly.

'It's good?'

Dustin pulled back, his eyes gleaming with unshed tears but he was beaming, his smile so big it seemed to stretch his entire face.

'Good? It's brilliant, El! I love him', he said, reaching in to pull out the tiny lizard, holding it lovingly in his hands as the others gathered around to have a look, all reaching out to pat him.

How had El even known? Dustin wondered, running his fingers over the lizard's head with trembling fingers, his breath hiccupping slightly as he saw the pale yellow stripe on his back, just like Dart had had. He had missed Dart so much since everything with the Mind Flayer, he'd been his buddy, even if he was a monster from another dimension and had eaten his cat. But he hadn't been able to tell the others about what he was feeling, knowing they would think he was insane. For El to do this...to give him this exact present...it was the most perfect gift he could have asked for.

The sound of the door opening made El look up from the lizard and the joy lighting up Dustin's face, catching Joyce and Hopper as they tried to sneak back into the house unnoticed, their ducked head's not quite able to hide their flushed cheeks and suspiciously swollen lips. They both froze in the doorway as they looked up and found El watching them, eyes widening as she raised her eyebrows minutely.

God, why do I feel like a kid who's been caught making out with her boyfriend? Joyce wondered, before giving a little giggle, walking past Hopper quickly and disappearing into the kitchen, winking at El as she passed.

El smiled at her, before turning her eyes back towards Hopper, her smile changing into a small smirk as she tilted her head at him, expression deceptively innocent.

Hopper narrowed his eyes at her in mock-warning, but couldn't help the way his lips twitched up into a grin as he passed her as well, ruffling her hair playfully as he walked by.

Thanks kid, he thought, face softening fondly, hoping she could sense how grateful he was to her, even if he couldn't speak the words aloud. God knew he would never have had the balls to make the first move himself. She may be a stubborn pain in the ass sometimes but

she knew how to get shit done. She probably didn't even realise what she'd just given him...how she'd just changed his life. Joyce and him would be together one day, something he'd never even let himself dream was possible. This kid...his kid, he thought, choking up slightly, was something else.

It worked! El though, giddiness and utter bubbling up inside her as the urge to jump up and do a silly dance almost overwhelmed her. Her cheeks began to ache with the need to grin or scream out her happiness, but she held it back, knowing that Hopper was a....privacy?...person. He wouldn't want everyone to know. Not yet anyways. She knew they weren't together yet, having snuck off to go to the "bathroom" for a few minutes before the present's had began to be handed out and hovering beside the door listening to them, but they would be. One day. And it had made Hopper so happy. He'd been smiling when he'd walked in, something he rarely did, even when El knew he was happy. She didn't think she'd ever seen him smile like that.

And, she suddenly realised, her eyes lighting up, it also meant that when they were finally together...

El glanced at Will where he sat beside her and couldn't help the tiny giggle that escaped her, pressing her lips together when both Mike and Will looked up at her, turning away from where the others were still playing with the lizard Dustin had proudly named Aramis, in honour of Dart, watching him scuttle across the floor.

Will raised his eyebrows at her but El just shook her head, unable to give an answer to his unspoken question. Mike just gave her a soft smile, slipping his fingers between her where they rested on the floor, just glad to see her so happy.

And when they were, El continued, it meant that Will would become her brother. And Jonathan as well, and Joyce would become her Mama. Her wishes were all coming true! This was the best day ever...well, not as good as the day she'd come back or the Snow Ball, but definitely number three day!

The sound of the telephone ringing made them all turn to look at it as Joyce jumped up to answer, speaking quickly into the phone to

whoever was on the other side and hung up, turning to the group with a small smile.

'Lucas, that was your Mom. She's on her way to come get you, Dustin and Max. Apparently, Nancy called and she's coming to get Mike as well.'

The gang all let out loud groans and sighs, flopping back onto the floor dramatically, exchanging sad frowns.

'I hate that it's all over', Max mumbled, crossing her arms over her face as she banged her head against the floor, glaring up at the ceiling angrily.

'Same. I have relatives coming over starting tomorrow morning so there's no way my Mom will let out until after they're gone. That won't be till two days after Christmas', Lucas complained, pouting childishly.

'It's not fair', El added, resting her chin on her knees even as she slid in even closer to Mike, stomach twisting anxiously at the thought of being separated from him again after having had all these days together. It was not fair, she thought again, eyes filling with hot, frustrated tears.

'Don't worry, kid, we're coming over to Joyce's for Christmas dinner so you'll still get to see one of your friend's', Hopper told her, giving her a soft, understanding look. Yeah, I know it sucks, he thought, shaking his head. But it would still be a good Christmas. He'd make sure of it.

'Which Jonathan is cooking', Will added with a laugh, shooting his Mom a playful look as she gasped in mock-outrage, slapping a hand to her chest.

'I am not that bad.'

'Mom...' Will said, raising an eyebrow at her, amusement dancing in his eyes, 'You burn popcorn.'

Joyce burst out laughing, walking over to run her hand over Will's head, leaning over to kiss his forehead.

'Sad but true.'

'I just wish we could all be together for Christmas,' El said quietly, tracing patterns on the carpet with her fingers, her face falling as she sighed.

Mike's cheeks grew warm and he ran a hand over his neck nervously as he glanced around the room. He hadn't expected to be saying this yet...especially not in front of everyone, or...really more so in front of Hopper but....when was he going to get a better opening?

'Uh...about that...' he began, flinching when he saw Hopper's head snap towards him, eyes narrowing slightly.

'About what, Wheeler?'

'Um...' Mike stuttered nervously, wanting nothing more than to take the words back, but when he turned to look at El and saw the sudden hope beginning to light up her face, it made him feel braver, and he lifted his chin, meeting Hopper's eyes dead-on.

'My parent's are going to Florida to visit my grandparent's but Nancy and I...we're going to stay here.'

'What?' Dustin asked, eyes going wide as he gaped at him in shock, 'How'd you manage that?'

Mike shrugged, turning his eyes away, expression suddenly dejected as he scuffed his foot against the floor.

'We just said we didn't want to go and that Mrs. Byer's said we could stay at hers if they said yes. They didn't even fight us on it. I don't think they really cared that we wouldn't be with them', he admitted quietly, swallowing back the sudden lump that had formed in his throat.

It had been like that in his house for almost a year now, their parent's ignoring them, not even caring where they were or if they were home. He knew everyone said they were headed for a divorce soon and he couldn't help but hope they would just get it over with. They were so miserable together and didn't seem to care about anything anymore, especially not their kids. He couldn't wait till he was old

enough to move out. El and I will never be like that, he promised himself silently, fiercely. They would never treat each other like that, never ignore each other or grow cold, barely speaking. Their lives would be different. It would be better than they had both had.

Mike drifted back from his thoughts as he felt arms slowly circle him, wrapping him up in warmth and comfort as his friend's all gathered around and hugged him, arms patting his back and head. His breath shuddered out and he hugged them back as best his could, everyone letting out small laughs as he couldn't get his arms around them and just ended up leaning his head against Will's, closing his eyes.

He didn't need them anyways. He had Lucas and Dustin, Will and Max, Dustin and El, as well as Nancy, Holly, Jonathan, Hopper, Joyce, and hell, even Steve. They were his family. The best one he could ever ask for.

'Poor kid', Hopper muttered under his breath to Joyce, feeling a pang in his chest as he looked at his Mike and the tears that were swimming in his dark eyes as his friend's hugged him, shaking his head.

Everyone in town knew that the Wheeler's were seconds from splitting, and that Karen Wheeler was buying more wine than food these days, her kid's running practically wild around the town. She was a good Mom, but the mess that was her marriage would put a strain on any woman, even one as strong as her. And it was obviously affecting their kids. Mike looked like he was seconds from bursting into tears, wanting to be anywhere but at home, and Nancy was spending more nights at the Byer's than she was in her own bed, a fact that had raised many eyebrows but neither teenagers nor Joyce seemed to care.

'Of course he's staying. Damn kid's can't even be apart for a couple of days', he muttered to Joyce, tone joking, just loud enough for Joyce to hear, trying to break the tension that had suddenly spread through the house.

Joyce laughed, seeing the teasing lighting up his eyes, and elbowed him with an amused look.

'When did you become such an old grump, Hopp?'

'When my thirteen year old daughter decided to go and get herself a boyfriend.'

'I'm pretty sure she had that boyfriend before she even met you,' Joyce said, laughing as he turned to glare at her, huffing out an annoyed breath.

Boyfriend? El thought as she pulled back from the hug, frowning slightly, filing the word away to ask Mike about later before turning to him, eyes bright with excitement meeting his.

'You really get to stay?'

Mike nodded, smiling again.

'I really get to stay.'

El let out a loud squeal, jumping up and into his arms, hugging him tightly.

Mike's gave a quiet "omph", the air wheezing out of his lungs as she knocked into him, but he held on just as tightly, pressing his face into her curls.

They'd be together for Christmas, just like they'd both wanted. They wouldn't have to be separated yet, something they both dreaded, the panic and anxiety that had made a home inside both of them when they'd realised they're time together was quickly coming to an end fading a bit. They would have Christmas. It was more than they could have asked for.

El lifted her head from his shoulder, a sly but hopeful look on her face as she said, 'You can stay with us for Christmas.'

'What?' Mike asked, blinking at her, stunned.

'What?' Hopper repeated, loudly as he rose quickly to his feet.

Mike jumped back, eyes widening even further as he watched Hopper walk over to them. He sagged in relief as he realised Hopper wasn't

even looking at him, his arms crossed over his chest as he glowered down at El, expression stern.

Calm down, Wheeler, Hopper thought, shaking his head, inwardly amused at the panic that had flitted across Mike's face, making it go even whiter than normal. Why would he be mad at him? It obviously wasn't his idea. At that thought he turned back to his adopted daughter with a heavy, frustrated sigh. This kid was going to give him grey hairs.

El didn't even flinch, rising to her feet to stand in front of Hopper, her hands on her hips, mirroring his stance, expression fierce and aggravatingly stubborn, ready for a fight.

Mike shot the others a nervous look, but they were all too busy staring at the scene in front of them to notice, mouths slack, expressions alternating between intrigued and fascinated.

'No way, El. Not happening', Hopper began, shaking his head firmly.

El narrowed her eyes on him, jaw clenching.

'You said things would be different. You promised.'

'I think things have been pretty good already, kid. I know you want to be together for Christmas but I can't just let you have you're boyfriend stay the night...'

'Why not?' she pouted, giving him the puppy-dog eyes she'd somehow perfected over the last few days.

Where the hell did she even learn that?

'Please. We just don't want to spend Christmas away from each other. You could pick Mike up on Christmas Eves...'

'Eve', Lucas supplied kindly.

'Eve', El said, correcting herself, 'and we could have a sleepover and then wake up and open presents together'.

The sleeping part is not what I'm worried about, Hopper thought,

rubbing his eye with the palm of his hand as he sighed, deliberately ignoring Joyce shaking with silent laughter behind him.

God, he was losing his edge. When did he become such a pushover?

He lowered his hand, his insides softening, though his stern face didn't alter, at the pleading look on El's face, her brown eyes wide and hopeful.

Since a starving girl with a mop of freshly grown brown hair, half-frozen to death stepped out of the woods towards him, face wary but full of such trust and hope that it had knocked the breath out of him. That's when.

Hopper sighed again and El's eyes widened, as if she could sense his sudden weakening resolve.

'Okay, Wheeler can stay. But only the once. There will be no repeats, no more sleepovers of any kind for the next year. Got it?'

El nodded as she beamed, rushing forward to give him a hug.

Hopper couldn't help the tiny smile that curved his lips as small arms wrapped around his waist, hugging him tight, and kissed her head.

'Thank you, thank, thank you.'

'You're welcome, kid,' he said, lifting his head to raise his eyebrows at Mike, giving him a look that clearly said "I'll be watching you", grinning when he heard Mike gulp audibly.

**

When El and Hopper left twenty minutes later, El clutching her comic book to her chest, being careful not to wrinkle the pages, as they drove away, the teasing that Mike had been expecting quickly began.

'Ooh...going to have a sleepover with your girlfriend?' Dustin said, fluttering his eyelashes at him, laughing as Mike glared at him, fingers clenching into fists beside him.

'Bet you're going to get heaps of sleep, huh, Mikey?' Max added,

winking at him as she nudged him with her shoulder, almost knocking him over, while Will gave a loud laugh, though he remained silent, not wanting to upset Mike.

'Don't forget to give her a good night kiss', Lucas said, grinning, though he quickly sobered, pressing his lips together when Mike turned to scowl at him, glancing at Max warningly, in a way that said 'you really want to start something?'

Lucas shook his quickly as Mike eyed him, before drawing in a huge breath in relief when Mike looked away, blushing bright red, angry and mortified heat rushing to his cheeks.

'Shut up, you jerks. We're not going to do anything.'

'Uh-huh...'

'We totally believe you.'

Mike groaned loudly, turning desperate eyes around to try and find a way to escape them and almost sagged with relief when he heard the familiar sound of Nancy's car rattling up the drive, tugging on his jacket with a final glare at his friend's who only responded with cackles of laughter that echoed after him as he stomped towards the door, slamming it behind him.

He stood on the porch while he waited for Nancy to park, shifting from foot to foot in the cold, blowing warm air onto his hands, and sighed when he heard the door open behind him.

'Seriously guys, you need to stop...' he said, whirling around to glare at whoever had come out, expecting Dustin or Lucas, but was surprised to find Will standing there, holding out the gloves he'd left behind, smiling, amused.

Mike flushed slightly, giving a sheepish smile as he tugged the gloves on, before glancing over at Will who stood beside him, content with the silence, grinning as he saw Jonathan in the passenger seat of Nancy's car. Jonathan had three whole days off work for the holidays, and they had a whole plan for tonight, watching their favourite movies, making mix-tapes and staying up all night, since Nancy

would be staying for Christmas Eve. This night was just for them and he couldn't wait.

'Hey Will, I hope...I mean, I didn't upset you or anything by being invited to El's Christmas Eve, did I? You went to all this effort, making up the plan to let me stay and if you want me to stay here I will...'

Will quickly shook his head, cutting off Mike's rambling with a small smile.

'It's cool, Mike. The whole reason I came up with the plan in the first place was so you and El could have Christmas together. And we'll see each other for Christmas dinner anyways.'

Mike grinned at Will, hugging him tightly.

'You're seriously the best friend. Thanks Will.'

'Damn right I am,' Will laughed, before shivering as the wind blew through the thin material of his flannel, having forgotten to put his jacket on, 'I better head back inside. See you in a couple of days.'

Mike nodded, waiting till Will went back inside, the way they all did since everything that happened and quickly rushed up to the passenger door of the car, knocking on the glass of the window with his fist.

He almost gagged when he made out the shapes of Nancy and Jonathan pulling apart through the fogged up glasses, obviously having been making out. Ugh, he really didn't need to see that!

Oh, he thought, eyes widening in sudden realisation as he stepped backwards, turning away to give them some privacy. This must be what other people think when they see me and El acting all coupley. But...that was different! This was Nancy. It was his sister. It was different...and weird and just...ew...gross.

Nancy rolled down the window, her hair mussed and cheeks flushed as she widened her eyes at him, as if to say "what?"

'Can we please go?'

Nancy raised her eyebrows at him, but felt her annoyance at being interrupted lower a touch when she saw the desperate, mortified look on Mike's face, and the way he was glancing back at the house where she could just make out his friend's making faces at him in the window, taking pity on him.

She turned to Jonathan with a regretful sigh, leaning forward to give him a soft kiss goodbye.

'See you tomorrow?'

Jonathan nodded, running his thumb along the scar that ran along her palm, almost identical to the one on his own, smiling as if he could feel the way her heart jumped at his touch, before he reluctantly let go.

'Tomorrow.'

Mike shifted impatiently in front of the car as Jonathan climbed out, smiling distractedly at him, feeling like his toes were able to snap off, they were so cold, and quickly scrambled into the warm interior of the car that he'd just vacated.

Excitement thrummed through every inch of him as they drove home from the snow, beyond ready to get to the house and pack for his sleepover with El. He couldn't help the massive grin that stretched his cheeks, unable to believe that he was actually going to be spending the whole holiday with El.

Could this Christmas get any better?

**Notes for the Chapter:**

> Ahhh what did you all think? I am so excited to hear everyone's thoughts and see all your comments. Love you all- Katie xx

## 7. All I want for Christmas is you!

**Notes for the Chapter:**

> Hey everyone!!! I am so sorry for the late update today! I had the biggest, most insane day at work. Piece of advice, NEVER work in retail at Christmas haha not if you value your sanity anyways. Well...here it is, the second last chapter! I'm getting a little sad, I don't want it to be over :( I hope you love it! I know I do :D xx

By the time Nancy dropped Mike off at the cabin at four the next afternoon he had almost driven her insane. From the time their parent's left for their flight to Florida early that morning he had looked at the clock constantly, unable to keep still, wiggling and pacing all over the house and asking her over and over when they could leave.

His impatience and constant nagging had finally made her snap, rubbing her forehead as she told him to grab his stuff, leaving an hour earlier than she'd initially planned to head to the Byers.

Mike could tell he was being annoying but he couldn't seem to stop, jiggling his leg impatiently, eyes wide with excitement, in the front seat as they finally turned down the road that lead to the trail to the cabin. He was just so eager to see El, to be able to spend some time with just the two of them, even if the ever watchful eyes of the Chief would be on them at all times.

He scrambled out of the car before it had even come to a full stop, slinging the bag he had meticulously packed the night before over his shoulder and awkwardly balancing the small pile of presents his parent's had given him to take to the Byer's, where they still thought he was going, and two he'd messily wrapped himself, one for Will and one for El.

'Bye, Nance. Thanks', he said, as he slammed the door shut with his foot, running hastily and almost tripping in the snow, fumbling to keep the presents from flying through the air and being lost in the

dark.

Nancy shook her head at him, amused as she backed down the road with one last wave as he disappeared into the dark woods towards the cabin.

Who would've thought her dork of a little brother would be such a devoted boyfriend?

She smiled at the thought, secretly thrilled for him. She knew that all the last year he'd dreamed of being able to have a moment like this, not ever really believing it would happen, that she would truly come back to him. She wasn't going to tease him for being excited about finally getting this chance. Not when she knew exactly how it felt to have someone you loved that much.

Nancy's smile grew as she thought of Jonathan waiting for her at his house and pressed down on the gas pedal, suddenly feeling as excited as Mike had been to go and see her own boyfriend and spend their first Christmas together.

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Mike stepped over the trip-wire dripping with icicles with cautious feet as he finally reached the cabin, bounding up the steps and knocking on the door, being careful to get the secret knock right.

He shifted in spot on the porch, shivering as the icy wind blew down the back of his jacket, as he waited for someone to answer the door. He didn't have to wait longer than a few more seconds before the door swung open, El standing in the doorway, her curly brown hair sticking up everywhere, already dressed in a pair of festive bright red pyjamas with reindeers flying across them. The widest smile he'd ever seen on her face stretched her cheeks and he couldn't help but grin back, eyes softening.

Seriously, how did she just get more beautiful every time he saw her?

'Mike', she said, rushing forward to hug him before she froze, staring wide-eyed at the piles of presents in his arms in complete awe.

'Are....are they for me?' she whispered, reaching out to touch the

shiny packages, all wrapped up with bright bows, disbelieving that she could be so lucky.

First the presents sitting under the tree and now presents from Mike? How did she get so lucky?

Mike pulled the presents back with a laugh, shaking his head at her teasingly.

'One of them is for you but you have to wait till tomorrow. They're the rules.'

El pouted as she stepped back to let him in, closing the door behind them and locking it with her powers.

'That's what Hopper said too', she said, sending the presents under the tree a sullen, longing look.

Hopper chuckled from where he sat at the kitchen table, nodding a hello at Mike as he walked by.

'And we're both right. It's not like you have to wait long now, kid. What's in the bag, Wheeler?' Hopper asked curiously as Mike began to place the presents he was carrying under the tree.

'Just a couple of games I thought El would like and some Christmas movies we had from when Nancy and I were kids. Rudolph and the Grinch'.

Hopper nodded, secretly pleased that the kid had gone to all the trouble for El. Again. He was always of thinking of her first, making sure she was happy and comfortable. Really he could've done worse for a future son-in-law- and they all knew that's where this was headed, even if no-one had said it out loud yet. These two would be married within the next ten years. He'd bet his patrol car on it, he thought with a quiet chuckle.

When Mike went to set his bag down on the couch El caught his hand, shaking her head as she began to lead him towards...her room? No, that couldn't be right.

'Not on the couch. In my room', she told him.

Mike's face grew bright red as he shot a slightly terrified look in Hopper's direction.

'Uh...El...I really don't think that's a good idea...'

'It's fine,' Hopper said, his expression resigned as they both stopped in front of El's door, having obviously already had this argument with his adopted daughter sometime during the day, and from the happy look on El's face she'd clearly won.

'You can sleep in there but the door remains open at all times and no funny business', Hopper said, tone serious, stabbing a finger at them, but his blue eyes were alight with amusement.

Mike spluttered, almost bristling with anger as he stepped forward, cheeks bright red and eyes flashing with temper.

'I would never do that. It's not like that with El.'

Hopper snorted.

'Most guys your age...'

'I'm not most guys my age. And we're not just any thirteen year olds. I...I really care about El and I would never ask her to do anything she wasn't comfortable with. And neither of us...I'm not ready for any of that.'

Hopper stared at him for a long moment, in which Mike barely resisted the urge to squirm but he kept his eyes firmly on Hopper's, stubbornly refusing to show any weakness or break the gaze first, before he nodded.

He believed him. If it was anyone else he'd be coming after them with the shot-gun he had in his closet- as cliché over-protective a move that would be- but Wheeler...he was right. He wasn't most guys. The kid, stubborn pain-in-the-ass as he was sometimes, had already proven that ten times over. He'd do anything for those he loved, was selfless and loyal to his friend's, and was smart as hell. If it hadn't been for him and his friend's they never would've out-smarted and taken down either of the two monsters they'd faced. And above all of that, he'd already showed him over and over that El meant

everything to him, that he'd do whatever it took to keep her safe and happy. He loved her, even if he wasn't ready to say it aloud just yet.

As ridiculous as it seemed, both of them had found their soulmates at the age of twelve, and Hopper knew he'd never find anyone good enough for his daughter but damn it, Mike came pretty damn close.

So why not let them sleep in the same bed when they were still young and innocent and he didn't have to worry about anything happening. And if he was being honest, he really didn't have to worry about Mike trying anything. He respected her too much to do that. No, if he had to be concerned about someone trying something it was definitely El, he thought wryly, not sure whether he wanted to laugh or cry about the fact. God, he was going to have a hell of a time chasing them when they got a bit older.

Mike let out a sigh of relief at Hopper's nod and rushed to quickly stash his bag in El's room before he could change his mind, heart racing at the thought of being able to fall asleep and wake up next to El.

El, meanwhile, was eyeing their exchange curiously, tilting her head to the side.

'Is "funny business" the same as "get a room"?'

'Uh....yeah', Mike said, clearly his throat, throwing Hopper another nervous look, 'it is.'

'Oh,' El said, her eyes lighting up with understanding before she turned towards Hopper, frowning.

'Mike and I aren't going to have sex!'

Hopper spat out the sip of beer he'd just taken, his eyes bulging as coughed, trying to catch his breath, expression murderous as he stared at her.

Mike took a quick step back, head swivelling from El's innocent face to Hopper's gaping one, wanting nothing more than to disappear, his throat closing off with panic, adrenaline rushing into him so fast it seemed to scream "run".

This was it. This was the moment he was going to die.

'Where the hell did you ever hear about that?' Hopper asked, seeing Mike frantically shaking his head, eyes wide, quickly saying, 'Not me!'

El gave an unconcerned shrug.

'From Joyce. I asked her what "get a room" meant and she told me all about sex.'

Freaking hell, Joyce, Hopper thought as his breath wheezed out, racing heart slowly beginning to calm. Was she trying to give him a heart attack?

'And what exactly did Joyce say?' he asked, rubbing at the headache that was starting to pound at his temples.

'Well', El said thoughtfully, deciding to skip over all the really strange things Joyce had told her about boy parts and girl parts and how babies were made, not entirely sure she believed her anyways, 'She said it's something you do with someone you love very much and that you should only do it if with someone you trust as well. But not for a long time. Not till I'm a grown up or married. And Mike and I aren't grown or married yet so we wouldn't do it.'

Hopper huffed out a relieved breath, promising himself that tomorrow when he saw Joyce he'd give her a big smacking kiss in thanks and he didn't care who saw.

Till they were married...Joyce was a god damn genius!

'That's right', he said, nodding, his entire body bobbing with the frantic movement, 'You have plenty of time for all that later.'

Way later, he thought. Like when she didn't live in his house anymore and he didn't have to think about it. Ever.

Mike nodded in agreement and the entire room calmed, El remaining blissfully ignorant of the awkwardness of the last few minutes.

The rest of the night went a lot smoother, the two of them playing a

quick round of snap and go fish, and then squishing together at the small kitchen table with Hopper eating lasagne that Hopper had heated up in the oven.

They settled down in front of the television after Mike went off and changed into his pyjamas, a blanket drapped over both their legs and their hands curled together on Mike's leg, a fact that Hopper very purposely ignored. They didn't let go once as they watched Rudolph save Christmas and the Grinch learn the true meaning of it all, El watching with wide, fascinated eyes, barely blinking the entire time.

When El wandered off halfway through the second movie to go the bathroom, Hopper couldn't help but notice the way Mike immediately tensed up, shoulders going stiff as he glanced nervously over Hopper before snapping his head forward, staring so intensely at the television that Hopper knew he wasn't really seeing any of it.

He rose to his feet with a groan, walking over and taking the now empty seat beside Mike, raising his eyebrows when he shifted away slightly, hands twisting in the blanket on his lap almost anxiously.

'You alright there, Mike?'

'Uh...yeah, I'm fine', Mike said hastily, not looking up from his lap.

Hopper pulled a face, running a hand over his scruffy jaw, before sighing.

'Look, kid...you don't have to be nervous around me. I know you think I don't like you. I probably haven't given you many reasons to think otherwise.'

Mike nodded hesitantly, looking at him out of the corner of his eyes, face wary.

'Not really. I mean...you kind of glare at me a lot.'

Hopper chuckled, shaking his head sheepishly.

'It's nothing personal, kid. Its a....well, it's a father thing. We're really protective and when a boy comes into our girl's lives...it's like an alarm goes off in our heads, something that tells us that this boy is

trying to take our girl away. It makes us a bit crazy. You'll understand when you have a daughter of your own one day.'

Mike blinked at that, quietly surprised, before his expression grew thoughtful.

He'd never really thought about having kids before...he was really still just a kid himself. But now that he did think about it he found he really liked the idea of having a little girl or boy one day- one with wild curls and big brown eyes. He couldn't help but grin goofily at the thought, at the idea of a life and future with El.

'Well anyways...' Hopper continued, biting back a smirk when Mike jumped, flushing hotly as he jolted back to reality, the cheesy grin fading a bit, embarrassed at being caught day-dreaming.

'I just wanted to let you know that I do like you so you don't have to be scared about me stopping you from seeing El or that you're going to say or do the wrong thing. You're a good kid, Mike, and there's no-one....no-one I would trust to look after El or to love her. Do you understand?'

Mike stared at him for a long moment, swallowing past the tightness in his throat, before his face suddenly crumpled and threw himself forward, pressing his face to Hopper's chest.

'Thank you', he whispered, his voice hiccupping on a quiet sob, unable to put into words just how grateful he was. He felt so...inadequate at times, like he didn't deserve El, that he wasn't good enough for her. To be told by her...well, essentially her Dad that he approved of him and trusted him so much...it meant more than he could know.

Hopper caught him in surprise, patting his shoulders awkwardly for a few seconds before he hugged him to his chest, hand on the back of his head.

'You're welcome, Mike', he told him, rubbing his head his gently, soothing him as he felt a wet spot begin to form on his shirt.

El stopped as she wandered back from the bathroom, eyeing them

where they sat side by side on the couch, Mike's eyes suspiciously red and Hopper's face pulled purposely into a innocent expression that she wasn't buying at all.

'Everything alright?' she asked, eyes narrowing slightly.

They nodded their heads at the same time, Mike smiling so brightly at El that she blinked, a smile of her tugging at her lips in reaction.

Hopper got to his feet, giving El her seat back, ruffling her hair as he walked past.

'Everything fine's, E', he told her, walking back to his seat the table, turning his attention back to the old cases in front of him.

El wasn't sure why but she couldn't help but think that she had missed something important, but as she settled back down beside Mike and he pulled her to his side, his fingers tangling with her own, she found she didn't really mind not knowing, cuddling contentedly into his side.

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Eventually Hopper was forced to send them to bed, ignoring both their protests as he kissed El on the head goodnight, patting Mike's shoulder gently.

'I'll see you both in the morning,' he said from the doorway, pointedly pushing the door open as far as it could go, before turning and walking back to the couch with a rueful shake of his head.

If anyone could see him now, he thought, scoffing at himself. Gone soft in my old age.

Inside the bedroom, El pulled the covers back and climbed into her bed, settling against the pillows with a happy sigh. She looked up at Mike expectantly where he stood on the other side, and he bit his lip, glancing at the door a bit skittishly, whole body going a bit stiff, sure he'd find Hopper standing in the doorway watching them.

He knew Hopper had given him his blessing to date El but he still couldn't help but worry that he would change his mind about him

sleeping in the same bed as her. He swore he could almost feel his eyes on him, even with the wall separating them.

'Are you okay?' El asked, her eyebrows drawing together with worry.

'Yeah...I just...I don't want to give Hopper a reason to shoot me', Mike joked weakly.

But El could see the real nerves in his eyes, and felt guilt creep into her stomach, cheeks growing hot and her eyes filling with hurt tears.

He doesn't want to sleep in the same bed as me, she thought, her lips trembling, not meeting his eyes as she plucked at a loose piece of string sticking up from the bedspread. She shouldn't have asked Hopper till she knew that he wanted it too. Stupid, stupid, stupid.

'I'm sorry, Mike,' she whispered, voice shaking with a mixture of devastation, hurt and embarrassment, 'If you want to sleep on the couch that's okay. I just....wanted to fall asleep with you. We never got to do that before and I missed you.'

Mike shook his head quickly, his anxious expression melting into one of pure tenderness as he climbed onto the bed beside her. His heart ached as he saw the tears shining in her eyes, taking her hand in his and squeezing gently.

As if he wouldn't want to sleep next to her, he thought, shaking his head the very ridiculousness of the idea.

'I missed you too, El. I missed you so much it hurt. And I do want to sleep next to you but...I'm scared Hopper will change his mind...and decide to kill me after all.'

El giggled at that, the hurt that had settled into a tight ball in her stomach loosening and disappearing completely as she grinned at him.

'He won't. Hopper keeps promises', she said, patting the bed beside her.

They both laid down carefully under the covers, listening to the other breathing, wiggling around as they tried to get more comfortable.

Mike was hyper-aware of every inch of space between them, of every move El made and the warmth of her arm seeping into his.

'Is this okay?' he whispered to her, not sure how close she wanted him, shifting awkwardly.

El glanced over at him for a second, her eyes gleaming in the light coming from the living room before she silently leant forward and took his arm in her hand. She rolled over onto her side, tugging him with her until he was pressed up against her back, his arms resting loosely around her waist.

Mike held his breath, heart stuttering in his chest as he felt El soften against him, her fingers slipping through his as she laid her head down onto her pillow with a yawn.

El snuggled in closer to him, feeling his breath against the back of her neck, his arm heavy against her waist, and relaxed, her entire body practically sinking into the mattress. It was there, in his arms, that she always feel the safest. Warm and protected and loved. She felt safe in a way she hadn't experienced much of in the thirteen short years she'd been alive, all those years of being locked away and so afraid all the time. But with Mike...she'd never been afraid of him, not once, even when he'd lost his temper. He was good and kind and patient and she knew he would never ever hurt her. He was her home.

'Night Mike'.

Mike held himself still, barely daring to breath, stunned by how much she trusted him, wonder filling him, as he felt El slowly drift off to sleep, breathing getting deeper and smoother until she was fully out.

Her hair tickled his nose as Mike finally breathed in, allowing himself to relax against her. He smiled as she let out a content sigh in her sleep, fingers twitching on his and tightened his hold on her waist, unable to believe that this was real. That she was really here, in his arms, safe and sound in his arms. It still seemed like a dream, one that he wanted to live in forever.

Mike knew, in that moment, that he would never let her go again. He didn't care who he had to fight, monster or human, or even Hopper, even though he still scared the hell out of him. He wouldn't let them be separated again. From now on it would be El and him against the world.

He silently promised her that as he pressed a soft kiss to her head, smiling.

'Good night, El.', he whispered, closing his eyes and drifting off himself.

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Mike groaned, reluctantly dragged to consciousness by the annoying beeping of his watch. He blearily looked down at the numbers blinking up at him, feeling like he'd only been asleep for a few seconds, widening his eyes to try to bring them into focus as the quiet rumble of Hopper's snores echoed from outside the open door.

12.00. Mike's head snapped up as he quickly pressed the stop button on his watch, a wide smile tilting up his lips. It was officially Christmas!

He glanced down at El, who had turned over in her sleep, her face now pressed to his chest, lips pursed in sleep, looking more peaceful than he'd ever seen her before, and felt everything inside him melt.

He carefully slipped out from under her arm, holding his breath as she made a noise of protest in her throat, frowning in annoyance for a second before she relaxed again. Mike blew out a relieved breath and walked over to where he'd folded his jeans earlier, tugging out the small package he'd slipped into his pocket when he'd placed the presents under the tree, and which he had spent almost hour painstakingly wrapping, wanting it to be perfect.

Mike walked back to the bed, climbing on and gently began to shake El awake.

'El...come on, wake up.'

El frowned again, eyebrows drawing together irritably. Her eyelashes

fluttered against her cheeks for a second before she opened her eyes and blinked up at Mike in confusion.

'Mike?' she asked, reaching up to rub at her eyes with her fists, 'What's wrong?'

'It's after twelve. Merry Christmas, El', he said, holding out the small package in his hands with a crooked smile, hands trembling slightly.

El's breath caught in her throat, suddenly wide awake as she looked from him to the present, her heart skipping a beat. She took it carefully, her fingers brushing the pretty gold ribbon on top of it reverently, before her head snapped up.

'You're present is under the tree. I'll just get it', she said, scrambling up to jump off the bed, unable to wait a second longer to give Mike his present, a secret she'd been struggling to keep. Lucas had said he would "freaking lose his mind" over the packet of figurines she'd bought him from his favourite movie, the characters from the same film as the little green man that spoke funny that he'd showed her last year. And she was pretty sure that meant he'd like them.

She had asked Hopper to buy her present for Mike, searching through endless amounts of catalogues until she found the perfect gift for him. She had used all her pocket-money from doing chores around the cabin, even though Hopper had offered to pay for it himself. She had wanted it to be all from her.

Mike grabbed her hand as she went to swing her legs over the side of the bed, stopping her with a quick shake of his head.

'It's okay, I can wait until you open yours. This time is just for you',

El didn't know why tears filled her eyes in that moment but she quickly blinked them back, giving Mike a trembling smile as she began to unwrap the present, slowly at first and then quickly tearing it away, to Mike's delight.

She cocked her head curiously at the tiny box that now sat in her hands, glancing up at Mike who just gestured for her to open it, shifting cross-legged on the bed, expression suddenly nervous.

She carefully lifted the lid and almost stopped breathing at what she found inside, mouth falling open in a small gasp.

It was a necklace, just like the ones she'd seen all the beautiful girls on television wearing, nestled on the pristine white interior of the box. She gently lifted it out, her entire body shaking as she ran her finger along the pointy edges, her eyes, bright with happiness, to Mike's dark anxious ones.

'It's a snowflake', she breathed, a smile so big and bright it almost stunned him spreading across her face, 'Like at the Snow Ball.'

Mike's shoulders slumped in relief at the way El was practically glowing with happiness, her love of his gift written all over her, and nodded, grinning broadly. He inched forward, taking the necklace from her, his tongue sticking out in concentration as he latched it. He smiled, pride rushing into his chest as he saw it settle around her neck, her hand immediately lifting to touch it, beaming back at him.

'Yeah...I wanted you to have something to remind you of that night and....to remind you of me when we have to be apart,' he said, his stomach dropping at the thought of the long year ahead of them and the wait until they could be together for good.

Only 359 days to go.

El's smile softened as she took his hand in hers, moving in closer till there faces were so close she could count every freckle on his nose, his breath fanning over her lips.

'It's beautiful, Mike but I don't need anything to remind me of you. I...I love you.'

Mike's heart froze in his chest, before beginning to beat wildly, staring at her in shock, sure he'd heard her wrong.

El...El loved him? She...she was in love with him, him, Mike Wheeler!

A wave of giddiness and pure euphoria surged into him, so strong all he could do was grin goofily at her for a second. Every inch of him felt electrified, vibrating from head to toe with happiness, and he suddenly felt like he could do anything, be anything.

Nothing could ever beat this moment. He knew he could never be happier than he was in this moment. El loved him!

When Mike didn't speak, one minute passing into another, the doubts and worry that had began to trickle into El began to steadily grow bigger and bigger. She shouldn't have told him! It was too soon. What if he didn't love her back? she thought, biting her lip as her stomach twisted anxiously along with her thoughts.

They faded into nothing, however, as Mike grinned widely at her, suddenly throwing himself forward and pressing his lips enthusiastically to hers.

El laughed giddily against his mouth, feeling light-headed as she kissed him back, beaming brightly as he pulled back, cupping her face in his hands gently. The love in his eyes made her heart clench as he pecked her lips again, resting his forehead against hers.

'I love you too, El. So so much', he said, the words hushed, just for the two of them, his hands shaking with joy.

El's lips trembled as a single tear trickled down her cheek, though she didn't know why she was crying. She was so happy, giddiness rushing into her chest, so quick and strong she felt slightly dizzy, but in a good way. The best way.

She hugged Mike tightly as his words seemed to make her heart grow three sizes like in the movie they'd watched earlier, and was sure it was glowing inside her chest.

It was the best Christmas they could have ever asked for. The first of many, they both promised each other as they kissed in the cold night air, the magic of the day truly alive as they whispered together, quietly making plans for their future. Together, as it was always meant to be.

They couldn't wait.

**Notes for the Chapter:**

> What did you all think? Please please let me know! Would make this hell of a day so worth it :D- Katie

xoxo
P.S. Who's excited for Christmas?

# 8. Home for Christmas

**Notes for the Chapter:**

> OMG HERE IT IS THE FINAL CHAPTER! I can't believe it's Christmas Eve already. Sorry (again) for the late update. I started at work at 6am and it was utter chaos and hell haha so glad for my two days off. I'm so excited for tomorrow and to hear back from you guys about literally my favourite chapter of the whole story! This was the first chapter I brainstormed and it's so sweet and Christmassy and...ugh! Let me know what you think! Merry Christmas beautiful readers! Love you guys soooo much xx

El came awake slowly, frowning as she opened her eyes and all she could see was black. She jerked back, confused, her frown softening as she realised the black was Mike's hair falling into her face, his head inches from hers, face slack and mouth hanging open, looking peaceful and adorable.

They had ended up on the same pillow sometime during the night, foreheads pressed together, hair flopping in each other's face as their hands curled together on top of the covers.

She cuddled back into their pillow, a small smile tilting up the corner of her lip as she ran a finger over his cheek, tracing the freckles there, drinking in the moment, not quite believing she'd really gotten the chance to wake up next to the boy she loved.

A thrill ran up El's spine at the thought, at the words that were still so fresh and new, and oh so wonderful, and she couldn't resist saying them aloud.

'I love Mike', she whispered, her smile widening.

The sound of the coffee machine grinding to life made El sit up, her eyes widening as she saw the bright lights blinking cheerfully at her from beyond the door, suddenly remembering what day it was.

It was Christmas! It had finally come.

El kicked back the blankets excitedly, though she climbed off the bed slowly, being careful not jotstle and wake Mike, running on socked feet out of her room.

She skid to a halt as she found Hopper standing in the kitchen, smothering a yawn as he placed a mug under the drip of the coffee machine.

Hopper turned as he heard the patter of her feet against the wood floods, smiling sleepily at the wide, excited smile stretching her cheeks, eyes huge in her head.

'Merry Christmas, El', he said, walking over to where she stood, pulling her into a quick hug.

'Merry Christmas', she said slowly, carefully, making sure she said the words right.

'What's this? Hopper asked, tugging gently on the snowflake pendant that hung around her neck curiously.

'Mike gave it to me last night for Christmas', she said, face growing soft and dreamy as she clutched it in her fist and Hopper nodded in understanding, though inwardly he rolled his eyes, charmed despite himself by how ridiculously cute the two of them were.

Good choice, Wheeler, he thought, glancing over at the open doorway where he could just make out the lumpy shape under the blankets that was Mike, the joy in El's eyes making him somehow like him even more than before.

The necklace was perfect, something he knew El would cherish and it obviously meant something to both of them. It was the perfect representation of their relationship, based on unconditional love and trust, as well as the very first promise that someone had ever made to El and kept. The promise to go to the Snow Ball together.

Yeah, that kid was alright.

'Do you want to wake him?' Hopper asked, reluctantly, voice

grudging. He had wanted it to be just the two of them this morning, his first Christmas with El, but he knew how much this meant to El to have Mike with them. If she wanted him here when they opened presents than that's what she'd get. Today was for her.

El's face grew thoughtful, shooting Mike a quick look where he still lay sleeping, before shaking her head. They'd only fallen back to sleep a few hours ago, talking until nearly dawn about everything they planned to do together and that Mike wanted to show her when she was finally allowed to go out, El growing more and more excited at all she had to look forward to.

She had even given Mike his present, which had, as Lucas had told her, lost his mind over, yelling out with excitement as he ripped off the package to reveal the Star Wars figurines inside, including Obi-Wan, R2-D2 and C3PO.
'How did you even find these? They've been out of stock for months', Mike crowed, almost tackling her backwards onto his bed he hugged her so tightly.

El had only shrugged, smiling, keeping how she'd searched frantically for a gift and how, just by luck, Hopper had managed to find the very last packet at the comic book store, watching and listening happily as Mike pulled the figurines out and began to explain their storylines and why they were so cool, giving her R2 to play with, giggling as he began to beep as she pressed the button on his front. They had finally fallen dropped back off to sleep as the sun began to rise, heads pressed together, sleeping easier than either of them had in a year.

From visits in the void, El knew that Mike was definitely not a morning person, a phrase she had learnt from Hopper in those first few days in the cabin when he'd realised she was always up, bright-eyed and full of energy before 7 in the morning. 'Figures you'd be a morning person", he'd grumbled, yawning, looking grumpy as he stumbled from his cot to make breakfast.

She knew Mike would wake up if she asked him to but from the way he hadn't even moved when she'd climbed out of bed, when he was always so aware of her, she knew he was exhausted. No, she couldn't be selfish. She would let him sleep, she decided, shaking her head at Hopper again.

And...if she was being honest with herself...a part of her wanted this time to be just for Hopper and her, for them to share together. And she could tell from the reluctant look on his face that he wanted it just as much.

'No, let him sleep'.

Hopper nodded, obviously surprised, but he didn't question her, smiling.

'So I'm guessing you'll be wanting to open those presents you've been eyeing for the last few days, huh?'

El's eyes went wide and she nodded, expression so earnest and yearning he chuckled, waving his hand towards the pile of presents under the tree, giving his silent permission.

El ran over and halted by the tree, her eyes wide, utterly overwhelmed by the many choices in front of her, all gaily wrapped in red and green. And they were all for her.

She lifted one with trembling hands, slowing peeling off the paper.

'Just rip into it, kid. That's what you're supposed to do', Hopper told her as he sat down on the couch behind her, steaming coffee mug in his hand.

El grinned and began to really tear at the paper eagerly, while Hopper watched with a smug expression, her joy in everything he'd bought, that he'd painstakingly debated over in the store for hours, made something settle deep inside him and for the first time in a long time he felt truly happy.

El loved every present she received, the cassette player and tapes, the cabbage patch kid, the sparkly pink scrunchie, the brand new jeans and fluffy blue sweater, and the new overalls, as well as the set of nail polish in every colour of the rainbow and especially the brand new copy of "Anne of Avonlea", the second in her favourite book series and the first book that was all her own.

'Not a bad haul, huh, kid?'

El nodded, staring down at the many toys and gifts in front of her in complete awe before she blinked, her head snapping up as she remembered the thing she'd been hiding from Hopper for the last few days. The thing she could finally show him.

'Wait', she said, wiggling under the tree for a few seconds before popping back out with a wide smile, pine needles sticking in her hair and a hazardously wrapped flat package in her hands.

Hopper chuckled, plucking the needles out of her curls, jerking his chin towards the...whatever it was...in her hands.

'What's all this?'

El scooted forward on her knees and held the package out towards him with both hands, her eyes shining with excitement.

'It's for you. Merry Christmas'.

Hopper stared down at the present she still held out for a long moment and El felt her face quickly growing confused when he didn't take it.

Hopper swallowed past the lump suddenly firmly lodged in his throat, before speaking.

'E...you didn't have to get me anything', he said, taking it from her, handling it so carefully you'd think it was made of spun glass, as it was the most precious thing in the world. And, in that moment, other than her, it was.

El shook her head, chin lifting stubbornly.

'No. Joyce said you give presents to those you love at Christmas', she told him, tone adamant, her total belief in her words showing in her confident voice.

And you're someone I love. The words went unsaid, settling warmly in the air between them but Hopper heard them as loudly as if she'd screamed them, trying to blink back the tears burning at the back of his eyes.

He pulled the paper off with a few tugs, his hands shaking slightly, entire body stilling at what he found beneath.

Inside was a plain wooden frame with a photo of the two of them from before the Snow Ball inside, one he'd snapped as they'd been about to leave. El was beaming at the camera, looking beautiful and ecstatic to finally be able to go, cheeks flushed and eyes wide with happiness. He was looking down at her in it, his face so proud and soft Hopper almost didn't recognise himself.

He hadn't even gotten the photos developed yet, for fear of the men at Hawkins's lab somehow finding out. How had she done this?

'Jonathan helped me', El told him, as if reading his mind, watching him, inching in closer until her shoulder brushed his knee, leaning against him. 'Do you like it?'

Hopper nodded jerkily, choked up.

'This is really something, El', he said, gruffly, voice thick with unshed tears. 'Thank you.'

El beamed, reaching over to the tug the cabbage patch doll over to her, running her fingers over it's curly brown hair (just like hers!) with a quiet giggle.

Hopper carefully placed the frame up on the coffee table, pride off place in the middle, before shooting El a look, stomach twisting nervously as the piece of paper he'd put in his pocket earlier that morning suddenly seemed to weigh a ton, unable to ignore it's presence any longer.

He took a deep breath before pulling it out from it's hiding place, clearing his throat to get her attention. His heart started to race anxiously as she lifted those large brown eyes to his and he silently scoffed at himself.

Look at you, big bad Hopper, chief of police, terrified to show a teenage girl a piece of paper.

But it wasn't just a piece of paper, he thought, swallowing hard as his fingers twitched and tightened on the envelope. It was piece of paper

that could change their whole lives forever.

'I have something else for you,', he told her, holding the envelope out for her to take.

El took it curiously, turning it over in her hands, missing the way Hopper's hands clenched and unclenched on his knees as he watched her, face tightening. She opened it, pulling out the thin piece of paper inside, her eyebrows drawing together for a second as she slowly mouthed the word, before speaking it aloud.

'Birth certificate'.

'Yeah....uh...it's a piece of paper that essentially states that you were born. That you exist.'

El nodded, still frowning in slightly confused, but it fell away, face going blank with shock as she read the words below it, breath speeding up.

Jane Hopper. The name Mama had given her next to Hopper's last name. What did this mean?

She lifted wide eyes shining with confusion and an almost desperate hope that it made Hopper's chest ache.

'What does this mean?'

'It...' Hopper began, pausing as his voice came out in a croak before continuing, 'It means that I've adopted you. That you...you belong to me now. That you're my girl. Doc Owens organised it for us. It says that you've always been my daughter with your Mama.'

'Like Sarah?' El whispered, staring down at the slip of paper, and Hopper nodded, jerkily, throat tightening.

'Just like Sarah', he told her, holding his breath as he waited for her to speak, to say anything to show what she was thinking.

El lifted her stunned eyes to his, swallowing hard.

'You'd be my Papa?'

'Or Dad,' Hopper said quickly, knowing the bad memories, pain and nightmares that came with that word, not wanting her to be reminded of any of that today. 'Or Hopper or whatever you want to call me. That is...I mean...if you want me to be your Dad.'

El looked from his wide, earnest face back down to the paper, the words on it blurring as her eyes filled with tears.
Jane Hopper. This piece of paper was such a tiny thing, so fragile and flimsy but...it held so much importance. It made her real. She truly existed for the first time in her short life. It made her Hopper's and him hers. For life. It made them a family.

She sniffled, looking back up to meet Hopper's anxious eyes, his face serious and concerned, the room so quiet, hushed as if the world was waiting with bated breath for her answer.

'I want to still be called El. Not Jane,' she told him, the absolute certainty of who she was clicking into place inside her.

El was the name Mike had given her, and it was who she'd become. Not Eleven, who'd been an experiment, nothing but a tool, a number to the Bad Men. Not even Jane, the name she was given at birth by her Mama but she'd never gotten the chance to become.

No, she was El. El who had fought monsters, both inter-dimensional creature and human, and had survived. El was strong and brave and smart. El was a fighter who liked soft, pretty things and teddy-bears, who loved eggos and was still learning about the world. El had the greatest friend's in the world and the love of the boy in the next room, as well as the best Hopper.

No, she never wanted to be anyone other than El.

Hopper nodded, his eyes growing wet.

'If that's what you want. We can always say El is a nickname.'

'Nickname?' she asked, frowning in confusion.

'It's a name you're friends and family give you to show affection.'

Like E or kid, El thought, her chin wobbling as fresh tears filled her

eyes.

'I want you to be my Dad. I want to be your girl.'

Hopper's breath shuddered out as he nodded, tugging her into his arms, resting his chin on her head as he pressed a kiss to her temple.

'Well...okay then', he whispered, his arms tightening around her, around his girl, squeezing his eyes shut to stop the tears in his eyes from spilling over.

El snuggled deep into his chest, tears running down her cheeks. Tears of happiness, she realised quietly, as she clutched him, feeling her curls catching in his beard as she breathed in the familiar smell of coffee, smokes and syrup that had come to mean home.

'I love you, Dad'.

Hopper let out a choked sob, pressing another hard kiss to her head.

'I love you too, El.'

El knew in that moment that nothing in her life would beat these last few days and all the moments that had changed her life forever. She had her friends back, friends she loved and who loved her back unconditionally, who showed her so many magical and fun things and taught her so much, and had made sure she had the very best first Christmas ever.

She also had Mike, the selfless, sweet, hot-headed, stubborn, kind, loyal and brave boy who had saved her, even if he didn't realise it, who had taken her out of the rain to his home when he'd barely known her. Who had given her warm clothes and Eggos, and had been the first to treat her like a person, and to care for her just for her. The boy whose patience and kindness had stolen her heart so quietly she didn't notice until it already belonged to him. Just as his belonged to her. The boy who was now her boyfriend.

And she had Hopper, the Papa...no, the Dad she had dreamed off but never really believed she would get. Hopper who looked all big and grumpy but was truly kind and fun, who protected and loved and scolded her, who read her stories, taught her about the world, made

the best Eggo Extravangas and who calmed her down after her nightmares and seemed to chase the monsters away just by being there. Just by being him. And now she was officially his girl. She belonged to someone. She had the family she'd always longed for.

Christmas was definitely the most wonderful time of the year and El couldn't wait for the many more to come. Ones she would share with her family.

**Notes for the Chapter:**

> What did you all think? I can't wait to wake up to all you're wonderful comments and reviews tomorrow and hope you liked the end of the story- Katie xoxo

**Author's Note:**

> What did you all think? I can't wait to hear from everyone, and I swear I will reply to all your comments! I will be posting up till Christmas so here's my gift to you all :D xx- Love Katie xoxo